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Gore Vidal: In Love with FDR

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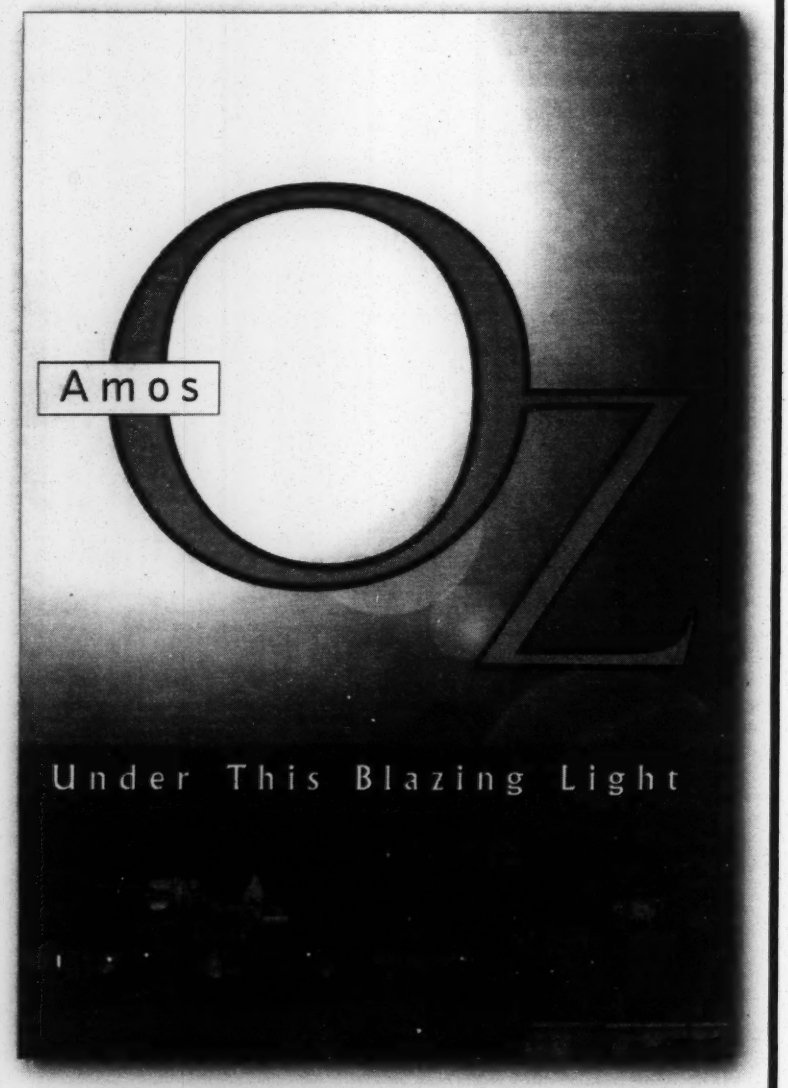

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Love on the Hudson

Closest Companion: The Unknown Story of the Intimate Friendship Between Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Suckley
edited and annotated by
Geoffrey C. Ward.
Houghton Mifflin, 444 pp., $24.95

Gore Vidal

For nearly twenty years I lived at Barrytown on the east bank of the Hudson, upriver from the villages of Hyde Park, Rhinebeck, and Rhinecliff. Technically, I was a River person, since I lived in a River house built in 1820 for a Livingston daughter; actually, I was an outsider from nowhere—my home city of Washington, DC, being as close to nowhere as any place could be, at least in the minds of the River people. *The* Mrs. Astor, born Caroline Schermerhorn, boasted of having never been west of the Hudson—or was it her drawing room at Ferncliff which *looked* west upon the wide Hudson and the Catskill mountains beyond? The River road meandered from some spot near Poughkeepsie up to the old whaling port of Hudson. Much of it had been part of the original Albany Post Road, not much of a post road, they used to say, because it was easier to take mail and passengers by boat from New York City to Albany. Even in my day, the Hudson River was still a splendidly convenient boulevard.

The area entered our American history when the Dutch patroons, centered upon New Amsterdam, began to build neat stone houses north of their island city. Of the Dutch families, the grandest was called Beekman. Then, in war, the Dutch gave way to the English, some of whom were actually gentry though most were not. But the river proved to be a common leveler—or raiser up. The newcomers were headed by one Robert Livingston, who had received from James II the "Livingston Manor" grant that included most of today's Dutchess and Columbia counties. Other wealthy families began to build great houses on the east bank of the river, making sure that their Greek Revival porticoes or mock Gothic towers would make a fine impression on those traveling up or down river. The Dutch coexisted phlegmatically with the new masters of what was no longer New Amsterdam but New York; they also intermarried, with the new Anglo ascendancy.

By the middle of the last century, all in a row from Staatsburg north to the Livingston's manor, Clermont, there were the houses of Roosevelts, Vanderbilts, Astors, Delanos, Millses (theirs was Mrs. Wharton's House of Mirth), Chanlers, Aldriches, Montgomerys. The Dutch Roosevelts of Hyde Park were fifth cousins to President Theodore Roosevelt (of Long Island). They had also intermarried not only with the Beekmans but with the Delanos. In fact, for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, his Beekman heritage was a matter of great pride, rather like an Englishman with a connection to the Plantagenets, the one true, legitimate, if fallen, dynasty. So it was with Franklin's cousin, Margaret (known as Daisy) Suckley; although a member of a good River family she, too, exulted in her Beekman blood and now in Geoffrey C. Ward's engrossing study, *Closest Companion*, of the two cousins and their...love affair? the joy that they take in their common Beekman heritage is absolute proof that although President Roosevelt wanted to inaugurate "the age of the common man" it was quietly understood from the very beginning that a Beekman connection made one a good deal more common than any other man and, thus, democracy had been kept at bay.

I remember Daisy well. She was a small, pleasant-looking woman in her sixties, with a charming, rather secretive smile. She had a soft voice; spoke very little. Unmarried, she lived in her family house, Wilderstein, having sold off an adjacent River house, Wildercliff, to the critic and Columbia professor F. W. Dupee. I would see her at the Dupees and at Mrs. Tracy Dows's but only once at Eleanor Roosevelt's Hyde Park cottage (the ladies did not really get on); I knew that she was the President's cousin (Eleanor's too) and that she had been with Franklin the day he died in Georgia. One thought of her as a poor relation, a useful near-servant, no more. By and large, there was not much mingling of the River cousinage. As the Astor family chieftain, Vincent, put it, "No Visititis on the Hudson." Even though—or because—they were all related, most seemed to be on amiably bad terms with the rest. Only Daisy, wraith-like, moved from River house to River house, a benign presence. Now Ward has read her letters to Franklin as well as Franklin's letters to her, and Daisy has become suddenly very interesting as Ward, politely but firmly, leads her onto history's stage.

Photograph courtesy of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library

FDR in 1937 at Top Cottage, Hyde Park, with the caretaker's granddaughter: one of the two photographs known to exist of him in a wheelchair. Both were taken by Daisy Suckley

Did Daisy and Franklin have an affair? This is the vulgar question that Ward is obliged to entertain if not answer. But what he is able to demonstrate, through their letters and diaries, is the closest friendship of our complex mysterious President, who kept people in different compartments, often for life, never committing too much of his privacy to anyone, except his Beekman cousin and neighbor, quiet Daisy.

It is no secret that Ward has already written by far the best study* of Franklin Roosevelt that we are ever apt to get. Along with his scholarship and wit, the last rather rare in American biography, Ward shared with Roosevelt the same misfortune, polio—he, too, spent time at Warm Springs, Georgia, a spa that Roosevelt had founded for himself and others so struck. Polio was the central fact of Roosevelt's mature years. He could not walk and, toward the end, could no longer even fake a steel-braced upright step or two where useless leg muscles were compensated for by strong arms and whitened knuckles, as he clutched at the arm of a son or aide.

The first fact of Franklin's entire life was his adoring mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, known to the River as Mrs. James. She adored him, he adored her. He always lived in *her* house on the River where she was chatelaine, not his wife and cousin, Eleanor. By 1917, the Franklin Roosevelt marriage effectively ended when Eleanor discovered that he was having an affair with her social secretary, Lucy Mercer. Eleanor's ultimatum was swift; give up Lucy or Eleanor will not only divorce Franklin but allow Lucy the added joy of bringing up *his* five children. Since Franklin already had the presidency on his mind, he gave up Lucy while Eleanor, with relief, gave up their sexual life together. Gradually, husband and wife became like two law partners. He did strategy and major court-room argument; she went on circuit. I never detected the slightest affection—as opposed to admiration—for Franklin in the talks that I had with Mrs. Roosevelt during the last years of her life. She had been profoundly shaken to find that Lucy was present that day at Warm Springs when he had his terminal stroke. Worse, she discovered that he had been seeing her for years, often with the connivance of Daisy. Eleanor at the graveside was more Medea than grieving widow.

A number of "new" aspects of Franklin's character emerge from those previously unpublished letters and diaries, many not even known of until now. One is his almost desperate need for affection from a woman (or amiable company from a man like Harry Hopkins) and how little he got of either. Until his mother's death, he relied on her for comfort. When she was gone he was either alone and depressed in the White House or surrounded by people for whom, despite his failing strength, he had to be unrelievedly "on" or, as he put it, "Exhibit A."

Most Rooseveltians are either Franklinites or Eleanorites. Since I never knew him, I saw him largely through my family's eyes—that is to say as a sinister, rather treacherous, figure who maneuvered us into war—while Eleanor I got to know as a neighbor and, later, as a political ally when I ran for Congress in the District. Now I begin to see how Eleanor must have looked to Daisy and, perhaps, to Franklin, too. The portrait is forbidding. She is forever on the move, on the firm's behalf, of course, but there are hints that she would rather be anywhere than at his side. Daisy is almost always careful to praise Eleanor's good works. But there are times when Daisy grows exasperated with a wife who is never there to look after an invalid husband who, by 1944, is visibly dying before their eyes. On February 8, 1944, Daisy notes in her diary: "I said he should either take a rest or a short drive, every afternoon. He said he hated to drive alone. I said he should ask Mrs. R. He laughed: 'I would have to make an appointment a week ahead!'"

Eleanor also saw to it that Franklin would never have a decent meal in the White House:

> The P. [President] & all the men came back about 7.45; all enthusiastic about their supper. The P. told them at supper that in the W. H. he never had such good beef stew, carrots, macaroni, home baked bread, butter, & coffee! Poor Mrs. [Henrietta] Nesbitt, the W. H. housekeeper!

Ward comments:

> Mrs. Nesbitt was a Hyde Park caterer whom Eleanor Roosevelt had hired to manage the White House kitchens. FDR disliked her and detested her pallid cooking, but was unable to get rid of her.

Before the Trumpet: Young Franklin Roosevelt, 1882–1905 (Harper and Row, 1985), and *A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt* (Harper and Row, 1989).

She was evidently as imperious as she was inept; when the President sent her a memorandum detailing his dislike of broccoli, she ordered the chefs to serve it to him, anyway. "It's good for him," she said. "He *should* like it."

Daisy concedes, "His wife is a wonderful person, but she lacks the ability to give him the things his mother gave him. She is away so much, and when she is here she has so many people around—the splendid people who are trying to do good and improve the world, 'uplifters' the P. calls them—that he cannot relax and really rest." But then, confronted with the disastrous news of his first thorough medical check-up in the spring of 1944—enlarged heart, congestive heart failure, hypertension—Eleanor said that she was not "interested in physiology." Like Mary Baker Eddy, she felt such things were weaknesses in the mind.

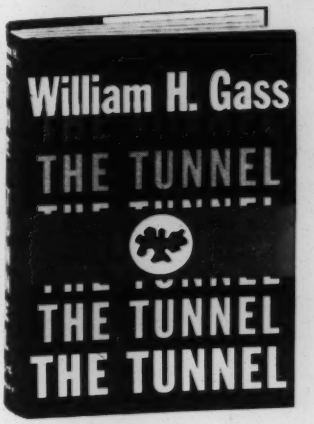
The Beekman cousins began their close relationship when he invited her to his first inauguration as president. Daisy was enthralled and wrote her cousin not long after, and so the long correspondence began; later, they would travel together. Daisy was what used to be called, without opprobrium, a spinster. Of the two boys and four girls at Wilderstein only one girl was to marry. Their mother, still alive in the Thirties, loathed sex and, as Ward puts it, "invariably wept at weddings at the thought of the awful things awaiting the bride." Daisy showed no interest in marriage and, presumably, none in sex. By 1933 the Suckley fortunes were at a low ebb; the eldest brother had invested badly but then matters stabilized and she had her small income and could still live at home. In due course, she was put in charge of the Roosevelt library at Hyde Park. She was intelligent but not clever; drawn to quack doctors, numerologists, astrologists; she also *knew* that the ghost of Abraham Lincoln was constantly aprowl in the White House.

Daisy's first "date" with Franklin was in September 1934. He took her for a drive to Eleanor's get-away cottage, Val-Kill. There is rather a lot in her diaries of *little* me and the President *himself* at the wheel.

By November Franklin is writing, "You added several years to my life & much to my happiness." By early 1935, when the New Deal is in crisis with Huey Long, the Supreme Court, Dr. Townsend, Franklin writes her, "I need either to swear at somebody or to have a long suffering ear like yours to tell it to quietly!"

For the remaining ten years of Franklin's life, Daisy provided that ear. The letters to her have not all survived but hers to him are complete as well as her diary. She came to know many secrets. She was on hand when Churchill came to Hyde Park. Daisy was not quite temperance but Churchill's constant Scotch drinking awed her. When they visited Franklin's blue-haired cousin, Laura Delano, something of a card, the Prime Minister asked for his usual Scotch while the willful Laura, a devotee of complex sugary drinks, gave him a daiquiri to drink. Not noticing what was in the glass, Churchill took a sip

William H. Gass
THE TUNNEL



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—ALBERT MOBILIO, Voice Literary Supplement

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and then, to Laura's horror, spat it out at her feet. Even in my day, a decade later, Laura would look very stern at the mention of Churchill's name. Interestingly, for those clan-minded River families, so like the American South, Daisy was closer to Eleanor in blood than to Franklin—fourth cousin to her, sixth to him.

If anything "happened," it would have begun during August 1933 when they took shelter from a storm on what they called Our Hill. The spinster and the sickly polio victim seem unlikely as lovers though, a year earlier at Warm Springs, Elliot Roosevelt assured my father that the President was very active sexually, particularly with his secretary Missy LeHand. But that Franklin and Daisy were in love is in no doubt and that, of course, is the point. They were already discussing a cottage atop Our Hill for after the presidency, or even before, if possible. It should be noted that Missy Lehand's family thought that the house on Our Hill was to be for Missy and Franklin and I suspect that he might even have mentioned it as a getaway to his last love, Crown Princess Martha of Norway, who came to stay during the war, causing Missy to retire (and promptly die) and Daisy to note with benign malice, "The Crown Princess hasn't much to say, but as the P. talks all the time anyway it didn't make much difference. It is strange, however, that a person in her position, & with so much natural charm, has no *manner*! Even in her own home... she leaves the guests to take care of themselves..."

Daisy reads Beverly Nichols for hints on how to do up the house-to-be. Franklin thinks his own tastes are too simple for "B. Nichols" (how thrilled that silly-billy would have been to know that he was read and reread by the Leader of the Free World). Meanwhile, history kept moving. Reelection in 1936. Again in 1940. The Allied armies are finally beginning to win, and the President's body is gradually shutting down. It is poignant to observe Daisy observing her friend in his decline. She tries to feed him minerals from one of her cranks. (Analysts found nothing harmful in them, and nothing beneficial either.) She puts a masseur onto him who tells him he'll soon be walking. So eager is Franklin for good news that he claims to have been able to move a little toe.

Daisy never forgets that she is River not Village. But Franklin the politician must speak for Village, too. She applauds his efforts at educating the national Village folk "because so many people in our class still object to more than the minimum of education for the mass of the people" as "they lose the sense of subservience to—shall I say?—us." It is plain that neither Beekman cousin ever had much direct experience with Villagers.

Daisy records a very odd conversation with the President's eldest son, James, on January 26, 1944 (the war is ending),

> At lunch, Jimmy talked about the young, uneducated boys who are learning that you kill or get killed, etc., etc., and may prove to be a real menace if, at the end of the war, they are suddenly given a bonus, and let loose on the country—He thinks they should be kept in the army, or in C.C.C. camps or something like that, until jobs are found for them, or unless they are put back to school—He says many are almost illiterate.

Fear of class war is never far from the River mind. Happily, Franklin was ready with the GI Bill of Rights which sent many Villagers to school, while his heir, Harry Truman, compassionately put the country on a permanent wartime footing thus avoiding great unemployment. Curiously, River's fear of Village was to come true after Vietnam when the Village boys came home to find that they had been well and royally screwed by a Village, not a River, government. The rest is—today.

At the time of the 1944 election, the infamous fourth term (decried by many Roosevelt supporters), Franklin was dying. But he pulled himself together for one last hurrah; submitting to heavy makeup, he drove in the rain in triumph through Manhattan. He was now sleeping much of the day. Harry Hopkins, his closest man friend, was also dying and so, in effect, the war was running itself to conclusion. It was Daisy's view that Franklin wanted to stay in office long enough to set up some sort of League of Nations and then resign and go home to the River. Incidentally, in all the correspondence and diaries there is not one reference to Vice-President Truman.

The President at a picnic on Silver Mountain, north of Hyde Park, 1940

Daisy's last entries are sad, and often sharp, particularly about Eleanor's abandonment of her husband. After some logistic confusion at the White House, she writes, "Mrs. R. should be here to attend to all this sort of thing. The P. shouldn't have to—and it has to be done."

Apparently, Franklin was always prone to nightmares. (Like Lincoln in a similar context?) One night he called for help with "blood curdling sounds." He thought a man was coming "through the transom," and was going to kill him. He asked to see a screening of *Wilson*, a fairly good film of obvious interest to Franklin as Woodrow Wilson's heir and fellow Caesar; by the picture's end, and Wilson's physical crackup, the President's blood pressure was perilously high; and there were no beta blockers then.

The Yalta meeting wore him out and both Churchill and Stalin noted that their colleague was not long for this world. But he knew what he was doing at the meeting. Eleanor told me that when he got home—they met briefly before he went to Warm Springs—she chided him for making no fuss over leaving Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in Russia's hands. The *Realpolitik* member of the firm told her that Stalin would not give them up without a war. "Do you think the American people, after all they've gone through, would fight for those small countries?" Eleanor sighed. "I had to agree that he was right again."

The deviousness of Franklin, the politician, was a necessity, increased no doubt by whatever psychic effect his immobility had on him. One of the reasons he tossed his head this way and that was not only for emphasis but to command attention—after all, he could never get up and walk out of a room—and his constant chattering was also a means to disguise what he was up to while holding everyone's attention. Of the two, Eleanor was more apt to be brutal. It was a disagreeable surprise to me, an Eleanorite, to read:

> Mrs. R. brought up the subject of the American fliers who came down in Arabia, & were mutilated & left to die in the desert. She insisted that we should bomb all Arabia, to stop such things. The P. said it was an impossible thing to do, in the first place, as the tribes are nomadic, & hide in secret places etc. Also, Arabia is a huge desert etc. Besides, it would be acting like the Japanese, to go & bomb a lot of people, who don't know any better.... I put in one word, to the effect that we have lynching in this country still, but we don't go & bomb the town where the lynching occurs—Harry Hopkins joined Mrs. R.—but their point seemed to me so completely illogical that I restrained myself, & kept silent!

One is struck by what such awesome power does to people and how it is the "compassionate" Eleanor who wants to kill at random and the Artful Dodger President who does not.

Finally, Franklin's obsessive stamp collecting pays off. He knows his geography. Unlike subsequent presidents, he knows where all the countries are and who lives in them. He is also aware that the war with Japan is essentially a race war. Who will dominate the Pacific and Asia? the white or the yellow race? As of June 1944, race hatred was the fuel to our war against Japan, as I witnessed firsthand in the Pacific. Yet Franklin, Daisy reports, is already looking ahead:

> In regard to the Far East in general which means the yellow race, which is far more numerous than the white, it will be to the advantage of the white race to be friends with them & work in cooperation with them, rather than make enemies of them & have them eventually use all the machines of western civilization to overrun & conquer the white race.

Today, such a statement would be denounced as racist if not, indeed, an invocation of the Yellow Peril.

Last speech to Congress to report on Yalta. I saw the newsreel at an army hospital in Alaska. The President spoke, seated, apologized for not standing but he said the weight of his metal braces was too much. Never before had he publicly referred to his paralysis. The voice was thick, somewhat slurred. It was plain that he had had a stroke of some sort. Then Franklin and Daisy were off to Warm Springs where they were joined by Lucy Mercer Rutherfurd and a painter friend. Laura Delano was also on hand. The River was rallying around him. Then, while being painted, he slumped and said, "I have a terrific pain in the back of my head." As he was carried into the bedroom, Laura alone heard him say, "Be careful." After fire, he most feared being dropped. Eleanor came and history resumed its course, and Mr. Truman does get a mention, when he is sworn in as president.

Toward the end Daisy was always there—closest companion—to feed him and watch him as he dozed off, to talk of the River and, doubtless, of Our Hill, though it had been plain for some time that he would never live there. I should note she signed her letters to him "M" for Margaret, her real name, or simply "YM," "Your Margaret." He signed his letters "F." All in all, an unexpectedly sweet story in a terrible time, when, along with wars and depressions and dust bowls, Villages became cities and the River polluted and one Beekman cousin petrified into history while the other, Daisy, simply faded, smiling, away. Ward has made FDR's story something no one else has managed to do, poignant, sad. □

McNamara's Peace

Theodore Draper

In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam
by Robert S. McNamara,
with Brian VanDeMark.
Times Books, 414 pp., $25.00

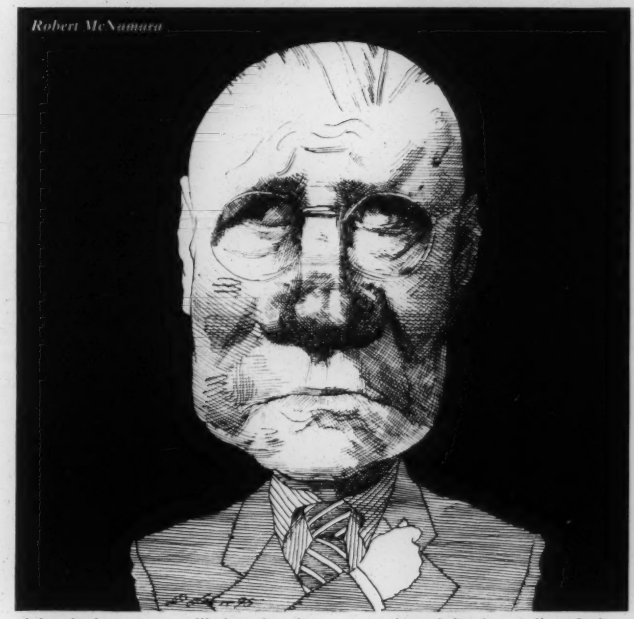
Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara has written a "Now It Can Be Told" book about the Vietnam War. He does not tell us all we need to know about the war; he has little to say about the battles on the ground and the local situation in South Vietnam, except as they bear on his main subject. McNamara deals almost entirely with how decisions were made at the top of the American command structure in Washington and what they were. We could not wish for a more highly placed witness, except for the presidents whom McNamara served, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, neither of whom left us anything comparable. Though McNamara has produced a personal testament, it is largely based on documentation, some of it unpublished, from the Kennedy and Johnson libraries and government files.

This book commands our attention because the Vietnam War is still with us. It was with us in Somalia where again we tried—and failed politically—to understand and change a people strange to us. It is with us in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where we have not ventured, because we are afraid to get into another quagmire in a place we do not understand and do not dare to try to change. It will take longer than a quarter of a century for us to put the Vietnam War behind us and act as if it had never happened.

The key decisions of these wars and near wars were made in Washington, where in the last analysis the president decides. This is why McNamara's portrait of the presidents he served and their inner circles has much to teach us, because the problems have not changed all that much.

McNamara himself was a most unlikely secretary of defense. He was an Irish American, born in 1916 in San Francisco to parents who had never gone to college; his father did not go beyond the eighth grade. He graduated from high school in 1933 at the bottom of the Depression and went to the University of California at Berkeley, because it was the only first-rate university he could afford. Then came the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, three years teaching a statistical control system in World War II, and soon after the war a job with the Ford Motor Company in Detroit. A few years later, he was head of the Ford Division, the company's largest unit, and in 1960, president of the entire Ford Motor Company. He made his reputation as a hard-driving executive at Ford and nowhere else.

When the newly elected President Kennedy offered him the post of secretary of defense in December 1960, soon after he became president of Ford, McNamara's reply was, "I am not qualified." McNamara knew so little of Washington's ways that, as he says, he did not know the difference between "off the record" and "on background." He confesses: "I had entered the Pentagon with a limited grasp of military affairs and even less grasp of covert operations." He knew nothing about Vietnam—but, as he points out, neither did President Kennedy, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, military adviser General Maxwell Taylor, and many others. Nevertheless, Kennedy told him that there were no schools for defense secretaries—or for presidents. At the age of forty-four, McNamara was the youngest secretary of defense ever, a year older than Kennedy. McNamara's background may help explain why he was more likely to break away from the official line than others with more bureaucratic experience. In any case, he was the odd man out in the later Johnson years.


Robert McNamara

1.

The great merit of McNamara's book is that it enables us to see how and to what extent the Vietnam War was fought and lost in Washington.

The self-inflicted ordeal in Washington began with Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight D. Eisenhower. On January 19, 1961, Eisenhower's last day in office, he and his chief associates met with Kennedy and his chief designated nominees for office, including McNamara. Eisenhower told Kennedy's group that the loss of Laos—and by implication South Vietnam—to the Communists meant the loss of all of Southeast Asia.[1] Yet Eisenhower had refused to intervene in Vietnam to rescue the French in 1954. Later that year, Eisenhower had put forward his "'falling domino' principle," according to which "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly." He specifically applied it to Indochina and Southeast Asia. His advice to Kennedy in 1961 was based on the same assumption.

The falling-domino "principle" haunted the United States throughout the Vietnam War and beyond. It is one of the most insidious ideas in the repertoire of foreign policy. It is a mechanistic theory, because it assumes a necessary succession from an initial starting point to a foreordained end. It inflates the importance of any single loss by making it apply to an entire region or even the world. A relatively minor part of the world can be made into a major disaster by theoretically adding any number of other countries to it. But the future is never that determined; the loss of Vietnam did not bring about the Communist takeover of all Southeast Asia. One lost domino *may* bring down other dominoes, but it may also spread an alarm that will save other dominoes. By its simplicity and fatalism, the domino "principle" makes further thought unnecessary and actually represents a form of abdication as well as a call to arms.

In any case, the Kennedy novices in power were overly impressed by Eisenhower's authority, even though during his administration he had not shown what to do about Vietnam. In June 1965, President Johnson sent an emissary to get more of Eisenhower's advice, and he again replied that "we have got to win" and recommended increasing the number of US forces in Vietnam.

Yet Eisenhower believed in something else which undercut his domino principle. He had been convinced that the French could not win the war in Vietnam, because the internal political situation in Vietnam was "weak and confused."[2] Thus he made strong and clear internal Vietnamese political leadership a condition of victory. Later, Kennedy expressed this view as meaning that the South Vietnamese "are the ones who have to win it or lose it."[3] Johnson reiterated that "the South Vietnamese have the basic responsibility for the defense of their own freedom."[4]

These two beliefs were incompatible. If the South Vietnamese were incapable of winning a war which only they could win, that war had to be given up for lost. But if the price of defeat was so great that it could not be tolerated, a Vietnam failure was unthinkable and whatever the cost the United States had to take over the war.

McNamara's treatment of this contradiction, which bedeviled all the presidents during the Vietnam War, tells much about his book. For much of his tenure McNamara went along with the prevailing wisdom; not for nothing was it once called "McNamara's war." It took him time to get his bearings and lose his respect for the bitter-end generals. His book is retrospective and does not always represent fully what he thought or did during his period in office.

In effect, McNamara set himself two tasks—to report on what was happening in Washington during the Vietnam war and to say *mea culpa* for the mistakes that were made. In both cases, he is richly worth attending to.

2.

The critical episode in Kennedy's period was the plot to get rid of the Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem. He had been the prime minister of South Vietnam for almost ten years when his regime seemed to disintegrate as a result of internal disruption by Buddhists, students, and others opposed to him. Raids on the Buddhist pagodas in August 1963 brought his rule to the breaking point. The Americans did not seem to dislike Diem so

[1] This was the gist of several memoranda about the meeting written by participants, including McNamara, now in the Kennedy Library. Eisenhower touched on the meeting in his autobiography, *Waging Peace*, but tells little about what he actually said. Kennedy was an ardent believer in the domino theory. In September 1963, he was asked whether he had "any reason to doubt this so-called 'domino theory,' that if South Vietnam falls, the rest of Southeast Asia will go with it?" He replied: "No, I believe it. I believe it." (NBC interview, September 9, 1963.) The most ardent believer in the domino "principle" was Richard Nixon. If Vietnam fell, he prophesied, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia had to be written off; we would have to fight a major war to save the Philippines, the Pacific would become a "red sea," and the United States would have to face up to Chinese Communist aggression as far as Australia in only four or five years (*Congressional Record*, January 31, 1966, pp. 21928–21930). That there were deep differences between the Chinese and Vietnamese never seems to have been seriously considered by any of these leaders.

[2] Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (Doubleday, 1963), p. 372.

[3] Interview with Walter Cronkite, September 2, 1963.

[4] August 12, 1964.

much as they detested his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, head of South Vietnam's security forces, and his wife, Madame Nhu, both of whom were considered irrational and uncontrollable.

McNamara goes into the Diem affair in detail, and it is worth the effort. Diem's downfall may have been the decisive moment of the entire war, and, above all, it showed how Washington acted at cross purposes and did not know how to handle a Vietnamese crisis.

McNamara holds the United States directly responsible for the anti-Diem coup. On August 24, 1963, he says, "Before the day was out, the United States had set in motion a military coup, which I believe was one of the truly pivotal decisions concerning Vietnam made during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations." In September, he adds, the Americans were "already in the process of initiating" a coup. The initiative, according to McNamara, was taken by Roger Hilsman, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. He was aided by Averell Harriman, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and Michael Forrestal of the National Security Council staff. Hilsman drafted a cable to Saigon which said that if Diem remained "obdurate" about removing the Nhus, "we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem." Hilsman, Harriman, and Forrestal were allegedly determined to send the cable that same day—and did.

Unfortunately, none of the highest officials was present in Washington at that time. President Kennedy was on Cape Cod. Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, was in New York. McNamara was on vacation. The new US ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, had been in Saigon for only two days and had not yet had a serious talk with Diem. As a result, the three so-called schemers succeeded in getting approval of the cable by getting most high-level officials, including Kennedy, to think that others had already accepted it. Lodge immediately sent the CIA station chief to two leading Vietnamese generals to tell them that the Nhus had to go but left the generals to decide whether Diem also had to leave.

Within two days, second thoughts began to trouble Washington. Kennedy regretted his approval. Kennedy's military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor, was shocked at the move. McNamara merely wanted Diem to alter his policies. Almost everyone but Hilsman changed his mind or could not make it up. Kennedy sent a secret cable to Lodge telling him that the President reserved "a contingent right to change course and reverse previous instructions."

This, in brief, is McNamara's story. But, almost twenty years ago, Hilsman gave a much longer and more detailed version of the same episode, and it disagrees with McNamara in some crucial respects. One of the most important is that McNamara had the United States "set in motion" the military coup; Hilsman says that two Vietnamese generals first "contacted American officials" to find out what the attitude of the United States would be if they "felt compelled" to move against Nhu and the regime. The generals said they needed to know quickly. Hilsman also says that he did not draft the cable alone; Under-Secretary of State George Ball, Harriman, and Hilsman allegedly participated in the drafting. Hilsman is as critical of McNamara as McNamara is of Hilsman.[5]

There is a third version of some interest. George Ball says that the allegedly fatal wire of August 24, 1963, was composed by Harriman and Hilsman and that they showed it to him on a golf course. After Ball essentially approved the message, he got in touch with Kennedy in Hyannisport, who went along with it on condition that Rusk and Roswell Gilpatric, McNamara's deputy, agreed. Ball also pleads that he "signed off" on the telegram, because Harriman and Hilsman said that Ambassador Lodge needed a prompt answer.[6]

In any case, all these versions attest to the almost chaotic state of the leading circles in Washington. Subordinate figures snowballed their superiors by telling them that someone else had gone along with the scheme. Ball's story of how he got Kennedy to agree is the most troublesome; the President put the responsibility on two others. Yet it is hard to see how the United States could have "set in motion" the coup if Kennedy and others regretted it two days later and held it up. No coup came soon after August 24; it did not come until November 1, 1963, over two months later.[7] Diem and Nhu were murdered after they were captured. "When President Kennedy received the news, he literally blanched," McNamara recalls. "I had never seen him so moved."

The Vietnamese coup was clearly less simple than McNamara makes it. It may not have been initiated by Hilsman, but by Vietnamese generals, and it was certainly not "set in motion" on August 24, 1963. McNamara himself says that Kennedy soon regretted it and held it up. When the coup came, over two months later, it was carried out by the Vietnamese generals, who went off on their own. No doubt the generals knew that the Americans had been thinking about it, but that is not the same as "setting in motion" or "in the process of initiating" a coup. On the other hand, those who made the United States altogether innocent of responsibility for the coup have gone too far, because the August 24, 1963, cable was made known to the Vietnamese generals, even if it was regretted soon afterward. George Ball, the opposite pole from McNamara, thought that the cable was a "damp squib" and had little to do with the coup.[8]

The entire incident still needs to be cleared up, because McNamara's version is not altogether satisfactory. But something is more important than the details of the coup. Policy-making in Washington was chaotic. Kennedy and his top advisers first made a hasty decision to threaten to overthrow Diem if he did not get rid of the Nhus and then dithered for over two months until the Vietnamese generals took matters into their own bloody hands to the surprise of the Americans. Those Americans who had opposed toppling Diem—McNamara among them—had done so not out of sympathy with Diem but because they did not believe there was a suitable successor to him among the Vietnamese generals. And they were proven right. One Vietnamese government after another collapsed after Diem's fall. Though Diem had virtually no defenders in the American government, what made the Americans hesitate was that they considered everyone else worse.

Here we come to the nub of the question. Every president from Eisenhower to Johnson said that the war could be won only by the Vietnamese themselves. McNamara comes back again and again to this principle:

> Throughout the Kennedy years, we operated on two premises that ultimately proved contradictory. One was that the fall of South Vietnam to Communism would threaten the security of the United States and the Western world. The other was that only the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and that America should limit its role to providing training and logistical support.
>
> If there is a strong South Vietnamese effort, [US combat troops] may not be needed; if there is not such an effort, US forces could not accomplish their mission in the midst of an apathetic or hostile population.
>
> The cardinal question had never gone away: If the South Vietnamese government, such as it was, could not gain and keep its people's support and defeat the insurgents, could we do it for them?

Thus the coup against Diem and the demoralization of the Vietnamese regimes after him presented the Americans with a fundamental choice—either to give up the Vietnam War as a bad bargain or to assume full responsibility for it in place of the Vietnamese. Kennedy himself spoke out of both sides of his mouth. On one occasion, he made the South Vietnamese responsible for their own fate; on another, he embraced the domino theory and said, "We should not withdraw." McNamara thinks that Kennedy, if he had lived, would have pulled us out of Vietnam. It is, in my opinion, doubtful because Kennedy did not have the prestige in foreign affairs to take a step which would have marked him as the president who had lost a war even before the United States had made every effort to avoid such a historic loss.

Forever after in the Vietnam War, the fundamental clash of policy was between the domino theory and the only-the-Vietnamese-can-win-the-war premise. In part, the confusion of US policy resulted because the presidents professed to believe in both, and in a pinch chose the domino theory. The choice underlies the crises that beset the entire war.

3.

Lyndon Johnson had opposed the coup against Diem. His own national security team—including a reformed George Ball and an unreconstructed Dean Rusk—was also deeply split. "Johnson," according to McNamara, "inherited a god-awful mess eminently more dangerous than the one Kennedy had inherited from Eisenhower." Johnson was more convinced than Kennedy that the takeover of South Vietnam was a step in the direction of Soviet and Chinese world hegemony. Johnson "wanted to win the war."

Thus McNamara introduces Johnson into the Vietnam War. In the early years of the Johnson administration and to the end of 1965, McNamara himself backed the prosecution of the war. He agreed to send more troops to Vietnam but had increasingly less hope that they could prevail.

Johnson's Rubicon was the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of September 1964. Again the details are less important in themselves than in what they signify. McNamara reveals that Johnson had contemplated getting a congressional resolution in support of the war as early as May 1964.[9] But two alleged

[5] Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Doubleday, 1967), pp. 484–487, 507.

[6] George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (Norton, 1982), pp. 371–372.

[7] Earlier versions play variations on these themes. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., also names Harriman, Hilsman, and Forrestal as the chief wire-pullers against Diem but calls them "the Harriman group." Schlesinger attributes the first intimations of the coming coup to the Vietnamese generals; Kennedy felt that "he had been pressed too hard and fast" and soon drew back; the coup took place when Lodge and Diem seemed to be reaching some understanding. "It is important to state clearly that the coup of November 1, 1963, was entirely planned and carried out by the Vietnamese." (*A Thousand Days*, Houghton Mifflin, 1965, pp. 990–997.)

Theodore C. Sorensen says that Kennedy did not want to bring Diem down. "Kennedy's advisers were more deeply divided on the internal situation in Saigon than on any previous issue.... Whichever way he turned—continuing to support Diem or interfering in his internal affairs—Kennedy foresaw the United States losing respect in the eyes of many Vietnamese. [The coup] received no assistance from the United States, nor did this country do anything to prevent or defeat it." (*Kennedy*, Harper and Row, 1965, pp. 659–660.)

Both these versions conflict sharply with Hilsman's and McNamara's.

[8] George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern*, pp. 373–374.

[9] McNamara says that a small group under George Ball submitted a draft

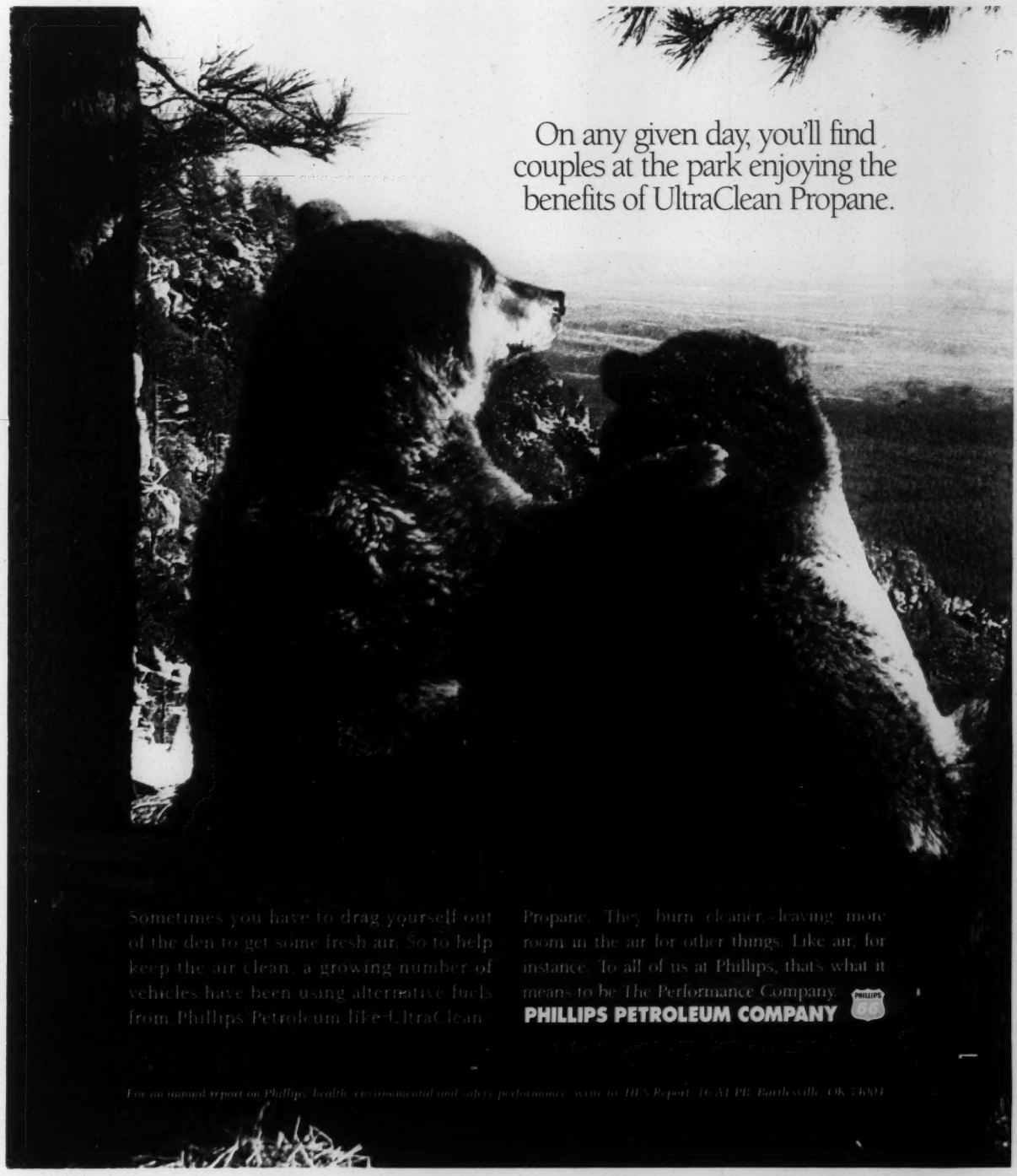
attacks by North Vietnamese patrol boats against the US destroyer *Maddox* took place, the first on August 2 and the second on August 4, 1964. Johnson did not react to the first one but added another destroyer, the *C. Turner Joy* to the patrol. The second attack was dubious, if not fictitious; even the commander of the *Maddox* sent word that it was at least "doubtful." Nevertheless, with McNamara concurring, Johnson ordered sixty-four bombing missions against North Vietnamese PT bases and an oil complex in retaliation.

These were not the only circumstances of the incident. In January 1964, the CIA was authorized to support South Vietnamese covert operations against North Vietnam, known as Plan 34A. Another operation, the DESOTO patrols, carried out electronic reconnaissance of North Vietnam using the *Maddox* and other US vessels; they stayed more than twenty-five miles off the North Vietnamese coast to protect themselves from attack. On July 30, 1964, a 34A mission by South Vietnamese patrol boats attacked two North Vietnamese islands in the Tonkin Gulf. Both Plan 34A and the DESOTO patrols were engaged in acts of war during a war; it is questionable how much the North Vietnamese could be expected to distinguish between the South Vietnamese and US roles in these operations. Whether or not the second North Vietnamese attack against the US ships had actually occurred, the US retaliated forcibly; the *C. Turner Joy* sank three PT boats and the *Maddox* one or two.

But Johnson was not satisfied with this score. He seized the opportunity to press his congressional resolution, which he later claimed gave him a "blank check" in Vietnam.[10] McNamara

resolution to the National Security Council on May 24, 1964, that it was discussed at a meeting in Honolulu on June 1, 1964, and that it was decided to present it to Congress in September. Ball says nothing of this draft resolution.

[10]It was passed in the Senate by 88 to 2, with Senators Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska opposed, and in the House by 416 to 0. The Senate floor leader was Senator J.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has little patience with this subterfuge. Congress, he says, "did not conceive of it as a declaration of war and did not intend it to be used, as it was, as authorization for an enormous expansion of US forces in Vietnam—from 16,000 military advisers to 550,000 combat troops." He also admits that he was wrong to tell senators that the *Maddox* did not know of the South Vietnamese attack on the two North Vietnamese islands.

Nevertheless, McNamara labors to defend the Johnson administration from the charge of having deliberately deceived Congress with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. But he admits that Congress was "misled" and that "Congress did *not* intend to authorize without further, full consultation the expansion of US forces in Vietnam from 16,000 to 550,000 men." He seems to rest his case on the proposition that "the problem was not that Congress did not grasp the resolution's potential but that it did not grasp the war's potential and how the administration would respond in the face of it."

It is hard to take this reasoning seriously. If Congress did not intend to authorize the immense expansion of the war, it did not have to grasp the war's potential. Whatever that potential, it should still have been necessary for the Johnson administration to come back to Congress for further authorization to expand the US forces in the war. Congressional approval of appropriations bills for the armed forces is no substitute for congressional approval of a large-scale war.

McNamara gives the text of a telephone conversation with Johnson on July 14, 1965, months later, in which Johnson said: "We know, ourselves, in our own conscience, that when we asked for this Tonkin Gulf Resolution, we had no intention of committing this many . . . ground troops." Johnson added: "And we're doin' so now and we know it's goin' to be bad, and the question [is]: do we just want to do it out on a limb by ourselves?" Thus Johnson knew that he was going out "on a limb" constitutionally by resting on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. In fact, both the President and Congress acted cravenly during the Vietnam War.

The most unmitigated warriors were the Joint Chiefs of Staff. All they wanted was more troops and more bombing in Vietnam. They put on the main pressure to get Johnson to send more and more forces to Vietnam. For them the domino theory was sacrosanct; when one of their representatives was asked how badly the loss of South Vietnam would shake the faith and resolve of other non-Communist nations, he answered: "Disastrously or worse." As a result of this view, McNamara writes, more bombs were dropped on Vietnam than on all of Europe during World War II.

McNamara reveals that the Joint Chiefs even contemplated the use of nuclear weapons to avoid defeat. On March 2, 1964, they sent a long memorandum to McNamara in which they reiterated "the overriding importance to the security interests of the United States of preventing the loss of South Vietnam." The United States should be prepared to destroy military and industrial targets in North Vietnam, mine its harbors, and undertake a naval blockade. China might intervene militarily, but a non-nuclear US response might not be able to force China to stop. They added that "nuclear attacks would have a far greater probability of" doing so, without claiming that even then they could prevent the loss of South Vietnam. McNamara comments:

> It was clear: the chiefs recognized that their program involved a change in US policy—including the possible use of nuclear weapons—but they nonetheless urged that it be adopted.

The possible use of nuclear weapons was also mentioned in November 1964 by a "Working Group" made up of senior civilian officials. "The president and I," says McNamara, "were shocked by the almost cavalier way in which the chiefs and their associates, on this and other occasions, referred to, and accepted the risk of, the possible use of nuclear weapons." Again, on June 30, 1965, McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, referred to nuclear weapons in a way that implied to McNamara that we should consider threatening their use. In 1966, the Joint Chiefs put forward a program which would require "utilizing the nation's full military capability, including the possible use of nuclear weapons." And on May 20, 1967, the Joint Chiefs sent McNamara another memorandum that it might become necessary to use nuclear weapons in southern China.

These references to the possible use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War have never before been made public and, in fact, have been denied. In his magisterial work, *Danger and Survival*, McGeorge Bundy stated that from 1965 to 1975 "the nuclear forces always at the president's command were kept out of it." He seems to be right that none of the three presidents in the war "ever came close to using a nuclear weapon," but he may have gone too far in suggesting that no one else in the administrations ever thought of their possible use. The temptation was there, even if it never got far enough to command the President's attention.[11]

4.

McNamara's fall from grace came as he gave up hope for a US military victory in Vietnam. Until then, he had gone along with the US escalation, even if sometimes with misgivings. As the United States poured more troops into South Vietnam, so did the North Vietnamese, with the result that nothing seemed to be gained militarily by merely increasing the numbers. The Americans never understood that the North Vietnamese were willing to fight to the last man, and for this reason were not amenable to ordinary diplomatic bargaining, except on their own terms.

On November 23, 1965, McNamara received a "shattering blow" from the US commander in South Vietnam. General William Westmoreland called for 200,000 more troops in 1966, bringing the total by the end of 1966 to 410,000 instead of the 275,000 previously estimated. Another 200,000 was considered possible in 1967. McNamara flew to Saigon to see for himself; he discovered that "the US presence rested on a bowl of jelly: political instability had increased; pacification had stalled; South Vietnamese Army desertions had skyrocketed."

On November 30, 1965, McNamara gave Johnson his latest appreciation of the war. He called it a "bleak choice" between a "compromise solution" or Westmoreland's escalation. By a compromise he meant accepting "less than our objective of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam." Just what was less he did not say. This choice received no serious attention. From this point on, McNamara was torn between a political compromise and an increased military offensive. The more he gave up the idea of a military victory, the more he veered over to a "diplomatic solution." While others in the administration were still optimistic, he was progressively pessimistic. Gradually he estranged himself from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and most of Johnson's senior advisers.

Finally, on May 19, 1967, he submitted a critical memorandum to Johnson. It virtually gave up on the South Vietnamese. It admitted that the North Vietnamese "seem uninterested in a political settlement and determined to match US military expansion of the conflict." It raised the specter of nuclear and chemical weapons: "The use of tactical nuclear and area-denial-radiological-bacteriological-chemical weapons would probably be suggested at some point if the Chinese entered the war in Vietnam or Korea or if US losses were running high while conventional efforts were not producing desired results." It showed that McNamara was vulnerable to the antiwar movement mounting in the US: "The Vietnam war is unpopular in this country." It took into consideration the broader view of the war in the world: "The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

McNamara urged that US policy be based on two principles:

> (1) Our commitment is only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future.
> (2) This commitment ceases if the country ceases to help itself.

Since McNamara had long believed that South Vietnam would not or could not help itself, he implied that the US commitment had ceased. In practice, however, he did not go that far. McNamara proposed "a politico-military strategy that raised the possibility of compromise." This strategy entailed more restricted bombing and "a more flexible bargaining position while actively seeking a political settlement." He recognized the dangers in such an approach but believed that the military option "could lead to a major national disaster."

The Joint Chiefs reacted with fury. McNamara's civilian associates were

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William Fulbright of Arkansas, who at the time said that it did not authorize the landing of large American armies in Vietnam (*Congressional Record*, August 5, 1964, p. 18403).

[11] McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (Random House, 1988), p. 536.

no less wrathful. His position as secretary of defense became increasingly untenable. In June 1967, McNamara asked John McNaughton, his Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, to collect documents on the war for the use of future scholars; this project resulted in what came to be known as the "Pentagon Papers." In July 1967, Johnson asked McNamara to visit Vietnam again; General Westmoreland still thought the war was being won but asked for 200,000 more US troops. McNamara himself was momentarily persuaded that progress was being made. In Washington, however, the main issue was whether to increase the bombing of North Vietnam. McNamara argued that no amount of bombing could prevent the North from reinforcing its troops in the South, and that anyway most of its war supplies were coming from the Soviet Union and China.

In the war of words between McNamara and the Joint Chiefs, McNamara did not stand a chance. On November 1, 1967, he gave Johnson another memorandum, in which he recommended stabilizing the fronts, halting the bombing of North Vietnam, and seeking to bring about negotiations. Virtually no one else liked it. This memorandum brought the agony of Robert S. McNamara to an end. Johnson found a way of getting rid of him by sending him to the World Bank as its president.

In retrospect, McNamara is not happy with his record in the Vietnam War. Unlike other books by leading participants, McNamara's is full of regrets and remorse. He regrets that the most critical questions about the war were never adequately analyzed. He lists the five most basic questions that were never asked: "Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West's security? What kind of war—conventional or guerrilla—might develop? Could we win it with US troops fighting alongside the South Vietnamese? Should we not know the answers to all these questions before deciding whether to commit troops?"

One reason these questions were not asked is that the Americans knew so little about the country and region to which they were sending hundreds of thousands of their troops. The Pentagon and State Department had no senior officials with intimate knowledge of Southeast Asia, because the top East Asian and China experts in the State Department had been driven out during the McCarthy years of the 1950s. "How were we to know," McNamara asks piteously, "when we were moving in an alien environment, alongside a people whose language and culture we did not understand and whose history, values, and political traditions differed profoundly from our own?" The American officers long maintained an attitude of optimism, because they were receiving false information from the Vietnamese. CIA Director John McCone later admitted that "the province and district chiefs felt obliged to 'create statistics' which would meet the approbation of the Central Government." The Americans on the spot, without knowing the language or the customs, passed on the same figures to their superiors in Saigon who passed them on to their superiors in Washington.

Nevertheless, McNamara made an effort to cut short the war without a military victory. His problem was that he was willing to go so far and no further. He never advised getting out of the war; the nearest he came to it was to recommend a "compromise" or "political solution," which he once implied meant a "coalition government." But this idea was never taken up and probably had no future. He now sees that his memorandum of May 19, 1967, should have called for US withdrawal from South Vietnam "through either negotiation or direct action." But it did not.

The Vietnam War peculiarly demanded a hardheaded assessment of what it was worth in the national interest of the United States. By itself, Vietnam was a fairly small, remote country, with which the United States had little in common. For this reason, the domino theory was so important in order to make it worth more than it was. The real test of American leadership was to see Vietnam as it was and not as it was multiplied by a theoretical formula. If we were to cut our losses and get out, it was clearly easier and better to do so sooner rather than later. The ideal time would have been after the coup against Diem, when it was shown, as McNamara puts it, that "political stability did not exist and was unlikely ever to be achieved; and the South Vietnamese, even with our training assistance and logistical support, were incapable of defending themselves."

In retrospect, McNamara now believes that we should have withdrawn from South Vietnam either in later 1963, following Diem's assassination, or in late 1964 or early 1965, when it became clear that South Vietnam's political and military weakness could not be remedied. If we had done so, our losses could not have been greater than they were seven or eight years later, and undoubtedly would have been much less. How difficult it was to go from recognizing that a military victory was a mirage to calling for a timely withdrawal was shown by McNamara himself.

McNamara now writes that "we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why." With this book, he has paid his debt. □

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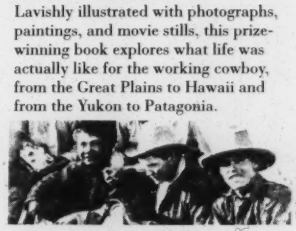

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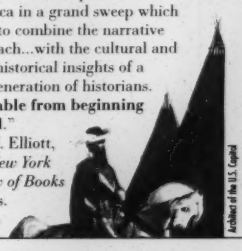

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Stumbles and Mumbles

Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me
by Marlon Brando,
with Robert Lindsey.
Random House, 468 pp., $25.00

Brando: The Biography
by Peter Manso.
Hyperion, 1,118 pp., $29.95

Don Juan DeMarco
a film written and directed
by Jeremy Leven.

Michael Wood

"As I stumble back across the years of my life" are the first words of Marlon Brando's autobiography. Is the metaphor Brando's or that of his co-author, Robert Lindsey? How would we know? Brando's stumbling, his mistakes, mismarriages, vanishings, and comebacks, are as much part of his legend as his mumbling. Certainly no one talks about Brando without mentioning the mumble. "As I mumble back across the years of my life" would also have been a good opening.

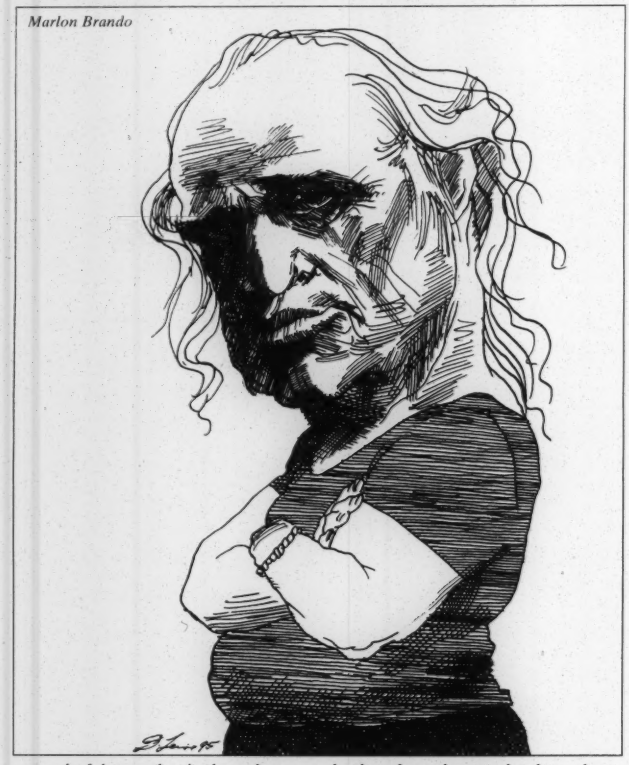
Both monumental Brando books are about a monument, guided tours round the fences of a myth. Brando's own story is about a little boy lost, who never recovered from his parents' neglect of him and his sisters; from his father's remoteness and his mother's disappearances into alcohol. Brando may have got a few things wrong in life, but we all get things a little wrong ("With age, I've come to realize that nothing is wholly right or wholly wrong"). He used to be full of anger, but isn't any more. He was looking for love all the time.

> I suppose the story of my life is a search for love, but more than that, I have been looking for a way to repair myself from the damages I suffered early on and to define my obligations, if I had any, to myself and my species.

"Myself and my species" pretty much gives the tone of the book. On page ix Robert Lindsey speaks respectfully of his collaborator's "musings," but by page x they have become "meanderings," and you can see how the shift would occur. "I finally came to the conclusion that in the end being Jewish was a cultural phenomenon...." Fortunately for Brando if not for the book, Lindsey is also adept in the sort of unedited pileup where you can come to conclusions finally and in the end. He had acquired, he says, "a passionate disdain for the shallow and self-centered egotism and puerility that afflicts most movie actors I had encountered." That self-centered egotism probably is the worst kind.

But Lindsey's unlikely implication about Brando is not entirely wrong. Brando is not shallow and puerile like those other actors. He is deep and puerile, addicted throughout his life to practical jokes that only he finds hilarious, but also capable of tenderness and insight and even discretion, although he does his best to talk himself out of these things. Of a man who used to let him ride horses when he was a child, Brando says, "Wes Mickler, born someplace, died on Bradley Road. He never said what happened in between." Brando says he liked the "*unmanaged*" faces (his italics) of the Tahitians he saw in the *National Geographic* as a boy, and the word tells us more than most of his meanderings about what he means by freedom. He understands hypocrisy and manipulation from the inside—"I suppose bribery begins with a smile that you don't mean"—and he remembers the sounds and scents of his childhood as if nothing had come after them.

> As I sit at home now, winnowing the remembrances, they often come across my mind as unrelated images and feelings with smoky edges....
>
> We had an old-fashioned cast-iron wood-burning stove that always embarrassed me. It was a wonderful stove, but in those days I was ashamed of it because it made me feel that we were poor.



Marlon Brando

Peter Manso's story is also that of a little boy lost, but this one turns first into an oaf possessed of astonishing sexual magnetism, and then into a prima donna with an intermittent social conscience. He doesn't know what he is looking for, so he wouldn't recognize it if he found it. Manso's last image is of a distraught Brando as a real-life King Lear, having all but lost a favorite daughter to drugs and madness and suicide. But the book's organizing narrative line is a morality of waste, such as American tragedies are always supposed to offer.

> By forfeiting his genius as the world's most talented actor, by holding himself and his accomplishments beneath contempt, he had squandered his energy, even his identity and inner core.
>
> ...he owed us more. At least the question had to be asked: Isn't a genius who has pushed the boundaries and probed the depths of our psyche obligated to the culture to continue his quest?

The best response to this question might be to ask who's kidding whom, but it is interesting that Manso's language of obligation should mirror Brando's, albeit scaled down from species to culture, and it is easy to share Manso's frustration. His huge book is not a labor of love but one of manifestly mounting distaste; still, it is pursued with the diligence and the desire for completeness that we associate with loving labors. It copiously supplies all the names Brando himself leaves out, from wives to one-night or five-minute stands, and it dutifully leads us from shoot to desultory shoot. Manso says he has talked to more than 750 people for his book, and a good number of them get to speak in his pages, their contributions deftly spliced into a chronological account of Brando's life. The trouble is that all of these people, necessarily, know that Brando is Brando, that they see what he was through the lens of what he became, and although this optical filtering is intriguing at times ("There was definitely a mumble," a schoolmate recalls), it can only take us through the myth again. A further difficulty is that Brando's colleagues and companions, with very few exceptions, are not very smart even about the myth, although some of them are pretty good at mixed metaphors, as in "He has that ability to pull the bullshit over somebody's eyes."

But the chief frustration, for Manso as for us, is the sense, if not of waste, at least of extraordinary loss. What was it that Brando had, and where did it go? The photographs in both of these books tell a lot of the story. The perky kid turns into the pouting young actor, who turns into an idol. The idol, scarcely created, disappears into a series of films that seem to be mainly about makeup: *Viva Zapata!*, *Desirée*, *Teahouse of the August Moon*. Even in *On the Waterfront* the makeup threatens to steal the show. The face is much older in *Last Tango in Paris*, but still amazing, both noble and spoilt, the face of Antony in *Julius Caesar*. A few film flops later, the idol returns as a vast human mountain, a sort of twin for Orson Welles. "Food has always been my friend," Brando says. "When I wanted to feel better or had a crisis in my life, I opened the icebox." Dieticians and movie directors would say food was his enemy, if not his nemesis; but we might just think that you take the friends you can get.

We can add a few facts to these pictures. Brando was born in Omaha in 1924; grew up in Evanston and Libertyville, Illinois; was expelled, in 1943, from a military academy in Minnesota. He took a class in the Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York, got a couple of Broadway parts, then was cast in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (on stage 1947, movie version 1951). The rest is stardom and gossip and a small handful of wonderful films. Brando bought an island in Tahiti, supported civil rights, the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement; refused an Oscar. Manso's story ends (as Brando's own story implicitly ends) with Christian Brando's shooting of his half sister's lover in Marlon Brando's house in 1990, and the ensuing trial as a result of which Christian was sent to prison.

What all this suggests, if we can resist the temptation to allegorize it, is a life full of complicated suffering, which Brando sometimes got to work for him as an actor, but otherwise mainly kept fleeing from, or sought to dissipate among countless distractions. At some point, it seems, he lost his sense of the difference between his suffering and his evasions of it, and the meandering looks like a way of sustaining the confusion as a mode of life. There is the hint of a happier reading in the new movie *Don Juan de Marco*, written and directed by Jeremy Leven, in which Brando plays a large, benign psychiatrist, about to retire but reawakened to life by the generosity of a patient's delusion—if it is a delusion.

Johnny Depp is a charismatic young man who says he is Don Juan, peerless swordsman and irresistible to women. He also says he is a kid from Queens, and has probably made himself up out of Byron and Tirso de Molina—we see the books lying around his grandmother's place in Astoria—but then he is so calm and eloquent about his invention, so scornful of daily reality on the grounds of its unmistakable dreariness, that his fantasy begins to look like the sensible option, and takes over the world of the film.

When the Depp character, without his Spanish costume and his hypnotic and bogus Spanish accent, finally tells a realistic story about his delusion and distress, it sounds like just another fiction, with nothing to recommend it except its mundane plausibility. So the film at the end frankly prefers the fantasy, makes it a reality. Will the boy, released from the mental hospital where he was confined after threaten-

ing to take his life, find again the probably imaginary girl from his romantic story, his lost love Doña Ana, the one woman who left him? "Why not?" Brando says in voice-over; and the girl appears on the beach. The movie certainly has its charming moments, but it's also so desperate to appear charming that the hard work begins to wear you down.

Brando is laid back and amiable, hamming it up only occasionally. He gets to say things like, "I just feel we surrendered our lives to the momentum of mediocrity," and he seems to be having a good time. When he dances with Faye Dunaway at the end of the film—she is his faithful and now no longer neglected wife—you get a sense of the grace that must always have inhabited even the roughest of Brando's affairs and extravagances. It's like a bear who remembers ballet school. And the memory—the sight and the performance of this memory—makes the bear's life seem less exclusively harrowing and scattered.

But it isn't grace we most remember Brando for—except when his grace is an aspect of his anger. What comes across as most authentic in Brando, in the books under review as in his best movies, is the rage he says he has outgrown. When his father was dying, Manso's informants say, Brando was "visibly shaken and concerned . . . compassionate . . ." Here is what Brando himself says:

> If my father were alive today, I don't know what I would do. After he died, I used to think, "God, just give him to me alive for eight seconds; that's all I want, just eight seconds because I want to break his jaw." I wanted to smash his face and watch him spit out his teeth. I wanted to kick his balls into his throat. I wanted to rip his ears off and eat them in front of him. I wanted to separate his larynx from his body and shove it into his stomach. But with time I began to realize that as long as I felt this way I would never be free until I eradicated these feelings in myself.

Even with time he hasn't realized how much he loves this fantasy of revenge, how intimately it gives him away. What matters here is the verbal violence, the imagined destruction of a body; the movie, in other words, playing now in Brando's mind as he writes, and not (necessarily) then, in 1965, when the unregretted Marlon Brando, Sr., died.

All of Brando's best movie roles are about rage, or more precisely, the control and display of rage, rage's disciplined indulgence. Is this what the mumbling meant? Did he mumble? He had a lot of cotton wool in his face in *The Godfather*, and he was splendidly incoherent in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But then what about the fruity talk (Brando's impression of Laurence Olivier) in *Superman*, and the funny accents in *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *The Missouri Breaks*? The crisp, mid-Atlantic diction in *Julius Caesar*, and the clipped Southern tones in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*? Words were hard to come by in *On the Waterfront*, and idioms got a little confused ("Never's going to be too much soon for me, Shorty"), but is that mumbling? Perhaps the famous mumble was largely the projection of an idea we had about the Fifties, that time of inarticulate rebellion—or if you like, that time when mumbling was as much rebellion as we could manage. Senior students of popular culture will remember a record of Stan Freberg's, where the band leader shouts, "Everybody mambo!" The orchestra starts to mutter and murmur, and Freberg yells, "I said 'Mambo,' not 'Mumble.'"

As far as Brando himself is concerned, he mumbles and he doesn't mumble. Of his Torquemada in *Christopher Columbus* he says, "I mumbled my way through the part and gave an embarrassingly bad performance. The pay wasn't bad, though: $5 million for five days' work." Elsewhere he resists the notion of his "so-called mumbling" in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This wasn't mumbling, it was naturalism. Or it *was* mumbling, because it was naturalism. "You cannot mumble in Shakespeare," Brando says, and he didn't. "I played many roles in which I didn't mumble a single syllable, but in others I did it because it is the way people speak in ordinary life." Not a single syllable: the phrase reveals the degree to which Brando too takes his cues from the Brando myth. Peter Manso has a funnier line about the mumbling. Asked to speak up a bit in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Brando says, "Some of the lines are so bad I have to mumble them."

But what is most interesting about Brando's diction as an actor is more mysterious than all this: a matter of timing rather than articulation, and full of intimations of silence, of the hopelessness of words, rather than of any sort of difficulty of expression. "You must have heard of me," the character played by Ben Johnson says in *One-Eyed Jacks*. "Bob Emery?" The Brando character, toothpick in mouth, about to take a drink, almost swallowing the word, says "Nope." The answer isn't loud enough to be aggressive, or quick enough to be automatic, a question of pride. But it is infinitely dismissive, not only of Bob Emery, but of all the world's Bob Emerys. Brando seems to be wondering whether he has heard of anyone, whether "hearing of" people is something he does, or has time for.

A little later in the same film, an extraordinary meditation on revenge and punishment, and a great western, the only film Brando himself directed, Brando and Karl Malden have a conversation about betrayal and enduring anger. Malden abandoned Brando on a hillside, surrounded by Mexican lawmen, and Brando has spent the last five years in what he calls a stinking jail in Sonora. Brando explains that he was "a little hot" about Malden's departure at the time, but that it's an old story now. His face assumes one of those expressions, his specialty, where genuine charm and total fraudulence are quite indistinguishable. He says, "A man can't stay angry for five years"—a pause—"Can he?" Malden hesitates, then laughs, the two men shake hands. Malden welcomes Brando into his house. A false peace is made, Malden is hoodwinked and later dies, his family disgraced, because he took Brando's question as a rhetorical one. Because he, perhaps, would not have stayed angry for five years; because he

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wanted Brando's statement to be true, wanted time and forgiveness on his side.

What is striking and sinister about the Brando figure here, as it is, I suppose, about all avengers, is the restrained confidence of his manner, the implacable certainty that a man could stay angry for ever if necessary, and might even enjoy it. The manner allows you to see the very idea of forgiving and forgetting as the weakness of others, something to toy with, make jokes about. *One-Eyed Jacks*, as both Brando books make clear, is littered with autobiographical references. The Brando character hates and destroys a father figure (called Dad for good measure), and seduces women in a series of joyless exercises in the charms of power, or maybe the powers of charm. But the result makes a wonderful movie, rather than a maudlin mopping-up of old messes, because of the richness of its silences, because of our perfect understanding of all that is not said. It's not that the desolation of revenge can't be spoken about, or mumbled about, it's that you have to share in the horrible, purified appeal of the thing before you can get any real sense of its emptiness. For this perception the wrong words, known to be the wrong words, are ideal; they suggest, better than inarticulacy or simple muteness could do, some ultimate poverty of language. Movies are full of this suggestion, of words that *don't* speak, except through what they leave out.

The phrase everyone remembers from *On the Waterfront* is, "I could have been a contender." But a moment earlier in the same scene Brando says, "You was my brother, Charlie. You should have looked out for me a little bit. You should have taken care of me just a little bit...." This is a scene Brando says he and Rod Steiger improvised after any number of failed takes done according to the script. Peter Manso, relying on Budd Schulberg and Charlie Maguire, the writer and assistant director of the film, says Brando, after some difficulties, "stuck with the script word for word."

Either way, the actor and the words dedicated themselves to understatement. "Looked out for" and "take care of" are conventional enough expressions of putative family concern, but the context makes them seem weirdly oblique. They mean: older brothers should not get younger brothers to take dives in the boxing ring for money, should not sacrifice them to their own murky, mobster careers. The repeated "a little bit" sounds ironic but turns out to be merely wishful: less than you have a right to expect, but a lot more than you're going to get.

Brando tries for a grim joke along these lines earlier still in the scene, and the joke misfires sadly, lapses back into the miserably literal. Steiger says, "It's time to think about getting some ambition." Brando, not quite smiling, says, "I always figured I'd live a little bit longer without it." Steiger says, "Maybe." These low-key exchanges, with their casual inversions of recognized values, have an almost Brechtian effect, because Charlie/Steiger, who hasn't looked out for his kid brother in any but the seamiest, most self-protecting ways, still can't bring himself to kill him, as he has been instructed to. He is himself killed for this excess of family feeling.

It is in part because he abandons these principles of indirection, switching to a notion that talk will do the trick if you get enough of it, that Brando's book and interviews go so far astray; and his performance in *Apocalypse Now* is awful for the same reason. All Kurtz says in Conrad is "The horror, the horror," but Brando can't wait to tell us what the horror is like. His own account of this scene is revealing in its muddle.

> I was good at bullshitting Francis (Coppola) and persuading him to think my way, and he bought it, but what I'd really wanted from the beginning was to find a way to make my part smaller so that I wouldn't have to work as hard.

This is in keeping with his line throughout the book. Acting is a despicable trade, but the money is easy:

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Marlon Brando directing One-Eyed Jacks, *1961*

"If a studio offered to pay me as much to sweep the floor as it did to act, I'd sweep the floor." But then something gets in the way.

> Besides restructuring the plot, I wrote Kurtz's speeches, including a monologue at his death that must have been forty-five minutes long. It was probably the closest I've ever come to getting lost in a part, and one of the best scenes I've ever played... I was hysterical; I cried and laughed, and it was a wonderful scene. Francis shot it twice—two 45-minute improvisations—but used hardly any of the footage in the picture.

This is a portrait of a man who works hard—too hard—but can't bear the thought of himself as anything other than an operator. It is characteristic that Brando should speak as he does of this lamentable scene—plenty survived into the finished picture—and yet claim that to this day he doesn't know what his remarkable, bravura performance in *Last Tango in Paris* was about. For *One-Eyed Jacks*, Brando turned himself from scratch into a masterly director, but his chief anecdote about that film concerns his looking through the wrong end of a viewfinder. In Manso's version of this story, Brando says, "Holy shit, no wonder I'm a week late," and again you wonder who's kidding whom. "I trusted his eyes," Karl Malden says of Brando as a director. Brando trusted them too, but could scarcely admit to himself that he did.

In recalling the elements of silence and indirection in Brando's acting, I am only spelling out what he himself says about his job when he's not trashing it. And even when he is. "Acting is the least mysterious of all crafts," he says.

> *Everybody* acts, whether it's a toddler who quickly learns how to behave to get its mother's attention, or a husband and wife in the daily rituals of a marriage... Whenever we want something from somebody or when we want to hide something or pretend, we're acting. Most people do it all day long.

This apparently leveling argument says interesting things about the relation between the actors in the audience and the actors on stage. Of the famous scene we've just looked at in *On the Waterfront*, Brando says it is "actor-proof": "a scene that demonstrated how audiences often do much of the acting themselves in an effectively told story." He goes on to talk of our necessarily identifying ourselves with the character he plays ("It couldn't miss because almost everyone believes he could have been a contender, that he could have been somebody..."), which I think is wrong because it goes back on the first point: that the audience is *acting* too, not just sympathizing, that we are filling the large silences not only with simple fantasies but with scraps of knowledge and pockets of fear. When Brando locates the attraction of Hitler for the Germans in "the theater of their minds," the connection is not appealing, but the theory is consistent. What happens in a successful scene of any kind is that the actor's technique fuels the audience's willingness to scrutinize what's in front of it and to imagine what isn't. If the audience is a set of actors, and the mind is a theater, then the stage, at least in movies, is the actor's photographed face.

> The close-up says everything. It's then that an actor's learned, rehearsed behavior becomes most obvious to an audience and chips away unconsciously at its experience of reality. The audience should share what you are feeling in a close-up. I have often reminded myself that I wasn't working in "motion words," but in "motion pictures."... In a close-up the audience is only inches away, and your face becomes the stage.

When we think we want Shakespeare's advice on acting, we usually call up Hamlet's speech to the players, and Brando does this too ("This not only pertains to acting but to all forms of art,"—never mind that he keeps insisting also that acting is not art at all). But Brando's own theory is perfectly expressed in the line he himself spoke so strongly as Antony in *Julius Caesar*: "I tell you that which you yourselves do know." This is not simply, innocently true: Brando and Antony are both more devious and exploitative than that, concerned to plant things in their hearers' minds. But it is true that they work with what they find in us, and work best with what's hidden in us, with that which we ourselves do scarcely know. This tactic can be very disagreeable. Brando likes to tweak the minds of his interviewers, and seems to have conducted most of his personal relationships along the same lines. But it is a tactic which can conjure up the deepest complicities.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brando makes James Mason as Brutus and John Gielgud as Cassius look as if they are walking through their parts, not because he is younger or more passionate or a proof of the virtues of the Method (Elaine Stritch, quoted by Manso, says, "Marlon's going to school to learn the Method would have been like sending a tiger to jungle school"), but because what he is *not* saying, what we desperately supply, fills the screen with overwhelming threat. "The greatest moment I have ever felt as a director," Joseph Mankiewicz says.

The movie itself is rather confused about Antony. There are camera setups designed to make him seem coldly calculating, and Brando himself tries once or twice, implausibly, to look like a ruthless schemer: he studies a map, frowns, gives an impersonation of a man thinking. All this is irrelevant to what Brando has actually made of Antony: a man smoldering with rage at the murder of his friend Caesar, but willing to contain that rage for the sake of a greater vengeance. The containment indeed seems to be part of some livid pleasure, and the resemblance of Antony here to the Brando character in *One-Eyed Jacks* can hardly be accidental. Brando shakes the hands of Caesar's murderers, greeting them one by one. Then he moves away, his back to the camera, staring at the hand that's done the shaking. As he turns to face us again, he snaps his hand shut, as if to say, there are worse things than distaste, let's leave sentiment for another time. He's not hiding his rage and contempt, and no one expects him to. The conspirators only hope that he will at least pretend to do business with them; he seems strangely to relish the demand for decorum, the chance to use manners to rack up the range of insult.

And what do we, the actor-audience, contribute here, what is it that we ourselves do know? Something similar, I think, to what we admit to knowing about the world of *One-Eyed Jacks*: that revenge is a dream, not a deed; a violence of the mind; that we can taste it only in meticulous, disciplined anticipation or recollection; that the taste is marvelous while it lasts. Somewhere in the back of the script for *One-Eyed Jacks*, Brando says, was "a western based on the plot of *The Count of Monte Cristo*." □

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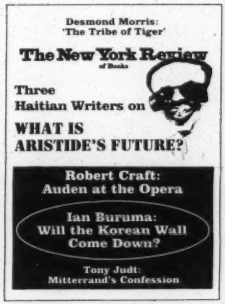

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Adders and Other Reptiles

Reptile Journalism:
The Official Polish-Language Press under the Nazis, 1939–1945
by Lucjan Dobroszycki,
translated by Barbara Harshav.
Yale University Press, 199 pp., $22.50

'Jews in the Polish Underground Press, 1939–1945'
by Lucjan Dobroszycki.
pp. 289–296 in **The Jews in Poland**, Volume 1, Jagellonian University, Research Center on Jewish History and Culture in Poland

Biedni Polacy Patrzą Na Getto
by Jan Błoński.
Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 156 pp.

Czeslaw Milosz

Reptile Journalism is a solidly documented account of the Polish publications that appeared under Nazi rule, based on material the author found in Polish archives when he was a member of the Institute of History at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He is now a historian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and Yeshiva University in New York. His book will be a precious source of information about wartime Poland for scholars, but it closely follows the original Polish version, and the author apparently felt he did not have to provide some basic facts for the American reader concerning the Nazi occupation.

In Germany during World War I there was a public discussion about what to do with the conquered eastern territories. German nationalist politicians advocated that only the regions which could be made to fit into German life should be incorporated into the Reich, since lands with ethnic elements that were too alien would be hard to digest. The same thesis was applied during World War II to the Nazis' conquests in the East. The western provinces of Poland were made a part of the Reich, while the central provinces were formed into an administrative unit called the General Government (GG), under control of a German governor, Hans Frank, who was tried after the war in Nuremberg for war crimes, found guilty, and hanged.

Contrary to some views, there was no Polish satellite state during the war years. Dobroszycki puts this succinctly:

> Poland was a country without a Quisling. But for the sake of historical precision, it must be said that in the course of their more than five-year rule in Poland, the Germans never seriously attempted to produce such a figure; for without some tangible concessions, including a margin of sovereignty (no matter how narrow), there was no place for Quislingism in Poland.

Would the Germans have been able to create in Poland a puppet state as they did in neighboring Slovakia? In Germany the GG was called "Gangster Ground," which conveys a sense both of the quick financial gain that was to be found there and the physical dangers as well. Germans like Oscar Schindler were lured to Poland by a hope of getting rich, but the region was far from safe for them. Resistance networks were organized into a Polish "Secret State," about which the American government learned from Jan Karski, a courier and eyewitness of Nazi atrocities in Poland. The Germans called the underground fighters "bandits," a word since used against freedom fighters in many other countries. A nearly hysterical patriotic conformity was imposed on Polish society by the Polish resistance groups, which were loyal to the Polish government in exile in London. The members of a potential Quisling government would have had a poor chance of surviving. And yet the very logic of Poland's hopeless position between Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia should, at least theoretically, have inclined some Poles to think about a possible accommodation with Germany, especially if they belonged to the political right. Hardly any did so.

'We are going to Germany!' A Nazi poster recruiting Polish workers, early 1940s

Still, the Germans were eager to organize newspapers. "Reptile Journalism," the name given them in the American translation of Dobroszycki's book, is not quite a faithful translation of "*prasa gadzinowa*," since the word *gadzina* refers to the adder, Europe's only poisonous snake. Thus the correct translation should be "The Adder Press," the name used by members of the Polish public to brand the Nazi-directed newspapers as poisonous. Yet they were read. People had, after all, to buy them, if only for weather reports (all radio receivers were confiscated), advertisements, and obituaries. As Dobroszycki reminds us, no Polish newspapers were allowed except those of the "adder press," which were published by the German "Department of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda." The underground papers were able to provide news based upon the BBC broadcasts, but for details of everyday life you had to buy at a newsstand the only newspaper available.

In this as in many other respects, the situation in occupied Poland was different from that in many other countries where the prewar press, though censored, was allowed to continue. Thus, as Professor Dobroszycki points out, in Bohemia-Moravia, during 1941 alone, "1,733 periodicals appeared, including 55 daily newspapers, as well as 350 journals devoted to culture, pedagogy, and various sciences... At the same time,... not counting the professional journals, about a hundred daily and weekly newspapers were published" in occupied France. Apart from Poland, the local press was entirely liquidated only in the parts of Ukraine, Belorussia, and Russia that were conquered after 1941. Also, though listening to foreign stations was forbidden, radio receivers in most other countries were not confiscated as they were in Poland.

I read the papers of the adder press when I lived in occupied Warsaw, and Professor Dobroszycki describes their contents well. With the aim of spreading despair and paralysis, they extolled the invincible power of Nazi Germany. They mocked the Western allies and the Polish government in exile; they tried to make the Poles feel racially inferior as members of the Slavic race. The other goal, as Professor Dobroszycki stresses, was to act as a smoke screen: no information was published on what was really happening in Poland, on the manhunts in the streets and the executions of hostages, or on what was happening in Auschwitz and Majdanek, and the "pacification" of villages by mass killings. Above all, there was no mention of the ghettos and the mass murder of the Jews. If one were to judge from these papers, the GG's inhabitants led normal lives, and no ordinary citizen had anything to fear if he did not transgress against "German justice."

The author raises a valid question about the influence of this sort of propaganda. He suspects that it was significant, and I would agree with him, especially so far as rural Poland was concerned. The quality of the adder press was low. No Polish journalist who was well known before the war worked for it. The papers were mostly written and edited by improvised teams of "*Volksdeutsch*"—Poles who declared themselves as having German ancestry. Although their prose and editing were clumsy, the papers could convey their message clearly enough to their readers, especially to those who had no more than a primary school education. Unfortunately, they had considerable success in fostering hatred of Jews, because some members of the Polish underground who had rightist and extreme rightist tendencies were spreading similar feelings.

Throughout Europe there was a large number of underground publications, and the author lists more than 1,500 titles of newspapers and periodicals in Poland, as compared with 1,200 titles in Netherlands, 1,200 in France, 550 in Denmark, 545 in Italy.

> The underground press in Poland was put out by all the parties, organizations, and groups which had existed before the war and even the new parties and organizations that came into being during the war were patterned on the prewar social and political movements.

I must add that contrary to other countries in Europe where the Resistance was identified with various shades of the left, in Poland the parties of the right and of the extreme right were also part of the "secret state," along with socialists and populists. Some members of the clandestine network in Warsaw were suspected of liberal leanings and were murdered by their political opponents. The nationalist and fascist political parties from the prewar period continued their anti-Jewish propaganda throughout the war, sometimes openly rejoicing in the prospect of a Poland without Jews. "All these groups," Professor Dobroszycki writes, "published about three hundred clandestine papers (not counting brochures and fliers)." Taken together with the propaganda in the adder press, the hate-mongering in these publications created an atmosphere that was dangerous both to Jews who escaped from the ghettos and to those who wanted to help them. Yet when the rightist underground editors and printers were caught, the Germans treated them with the same brutality that they applied to all the other clandestine militants, notwithstanding the anti-Semitic content of the rightist papers.

Professor Dobroszycki's account of the Polish wartime press corresponds to my own experience, and I will add only a brief supplement to it. The Thirties were an ominous period in Europe, and when we see today the explosions of nationalism such as those in the former Yugoslavia we realize how similar they are, in many respects, to the aberrations of the period preceding World War II. Most characteristic, then and later, has been a coupling of nationalism with religion. The Serbs' Eastern Orthodox Church openly or implicitly blesses the horrors of "ethnic cleansing." In Poland the nationalists invoked Catholicism in support of their doctrine exalting "Polishness," and they had the backing of a large part of the Church hierarchy. And nowhere was the

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internal contradiction of that partnership revealed more clearly than in attitudes toward the Holocaust. For whatever the relations between Poles and Jews, no Pole could pretend indifference to what the Germans were doing to the Jews without exposing his or her Christian faith as a sham. Many Catholics were aware of this.

In a separate study, "The Jews in the Polish Underground Press, 1939–1945," Professor Dobroszycki dedicates a long passage to Zofia Kossak-Szczucka, a Catholic novelist and founder of the underground Front for the Restitution of Poland (FOP). A heroic woman, she saved many Jews, both adults and children, and headed Zegota, the Council to Aid the Jews, in which several political parties were represented, including two delegates of the Jewish underground. The groups associated with Kossak-Szczucka's organization published a large number of underground papers. Among them the most influential and widely circulated was *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, which presented the "official" line of the underground government. Professor Dobroszycki writes:

> *Biuletyn* gave up-to-date information on the situation of the Jews in Poland, condemned the crimes perpetrated by the Germans, appealed to its readers to help the victims, and warned that measures would be taken against those who collaborated in any way with the Germans in the extermination of the Jews.

Zofia Kossak-Szczucka deserves special attention here, for her thinking reflects a conflict of two opposing tendencies within one mind and one heart. She was both a nationalist and a Catholic, unwilling and unable to renounce either commitment. Yet she believed that religion should take precedence over nationality; thus her Christian faith imposed upon her a duty to help Jews, while national loyalties bound her to her ideological brethren who maintained that the Jews were enemies of Poland. A person of strong religious faith, she resolved that contradiction morally, but was unable to find a way out intellectually.

Professor Jan Błoński in a book published recently in Poland continues the exploration he began a few years ago in his article on the Poles' passivity in the face of German persecution of Jews. He analyzes a text entitled "A Protest," a clandestine manifesto published by Zofia Kossak-Szczucka in 1942. Błoński has a deep respect for her heroic acts but has some difficulty in grasping her frame of mind. Her manifesto clearly denounces the crime of genocide, yet he finds in her position elements of latent anti-Semitism—an anti-Semitism of which she was probably unaware, particularly in her opposing the Poles and the Jews to each other as two separate nations. In this she probably was typical of many Catholics at the time, and her logic was shared, Professor Błoński apparently suspects, by many monasteries and nunneries which, although they saved Jewish lives, did not take a clear public position against anti-Semitism. He confesses that he is puzzled by "the question how evident anti-Semitism could go together with risking (or sacrificing) one's life to help Jews, a case not rare, particularly in Poland." To judge by the attitudes of some of the prewar political parties and their underground publications during the war, he writes, "The Poles' behavior could have been worse."

One of the main tasks of the adder press was to direct hatred toward communism, a task made easier by the experience of many Poles and their families in the Soviet-occupied zone. And during one period, at least, the articles sounded especially convincing. This happened in the spring of 1943, when the German propaganda machine announced to the world the dramatic discovery of mass graves in Katyn, near Smolensk, an area then controlled by the German army. Thousands of corpses were found of Polish officers who had been interned by the (then neutral) Soviet Union in 1939 during the partition of Poland between Hitler and Stalin. Excavations (to which the German authorities invited representatives of the International Red Cross) revealed that the prisoners had been executed in April 1940, being shot in the back of their heads. The crime thus occurred a year before Hitler's invasion of Russia, and the evidence pointed to the Soviets as the guilty party. The lists of the dead officers published in the adder press agreed with what their families knew about their internment, and correspondence with them had stopped in April 1940. Everyone in Poland therefore accepted the German view that the crime was committed by the Soviets. It would be difficult to imagine more convincing testimony to the credibility of the poisonous snake press.

For the Western allies the Katyn massacre became a major headache. Their intelligence services had no doubts about who did it, but the Western powers believed that to preserve the alliance with Stalin they had to pretend to believe the false Soviet version. For many years after the end of the war the Western governments and the Western press remained reluctant to accuse the Russians of the Katyn killings. The controversy ended on October 14, 1992, when Boris Yeltsin's personal envoy, Professor Pikhoya, handed Lech Walesa documents from the Soviet archives showing that the order of execution was signed in 1940 by members of the Soviet Politburo, with Stalin's name at the head of the list of signers. More than 23,000 interned Poles were executed in three localities, Katyn among them.

Dobroszycki uses diagrams to explain the relationship between Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda in Berlin and Hans Frank's Department of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Poland. But these relationships were not so simple. There was a constant tension between Frank and Goebbels, which was based not on disagreement over the basic tenets of Nazi policy but on their conflicting ambitions and personalities. They played a complex game involving several Nazi officials who were subordinate to Frank. A clever man, a lawyer by profession, he realized that the German policy of terrorizing the Polish population was ineffective and that more sophisticated measures were needed. He was able, however, to propose changes only after Goebbels realized the extent of the large German defeats on the Eastern front, i.e., after the battle of Stalingrad, early in 1943. In a circular addressed to higher Party functionaries on February 15, Goebbels recommended the following:

> 1. All forces of the European continent, but especially the people in the East, must be used against Bolshevism.
>
> 2. The people must be imbued with the conviction that the victory of Germany is in their own interest.
>
> 3. In this context, the degradation or offense, directly or indirectly, of individuals is not allowed.
>
> 4. Similarly, the impression may not be given that the Reich intends to create long-lasting subjugation.
>
> 5. Every expression on the subject of the German policy of colonization, and colonization in the East, is to cease.
>
> 6. Similarly, new or large German settlement, the distribution of lands, or any Germanization may not be mentioned. Nor may the deportations of the population be spoken about.
>
> 7. Anything that may damage the necessary cooperation of the people in the East and thus impede the German victory is to be avoided.

As soon as the circular reached him, Frank called a conference of his staff and presented the case for a new line of propaganda and a new and less repressive policy in the GG. When his proposal met with opposition in Berlin, Frank decided to appeal directly to Hitler. On June 1944 he sent him an extensive memorandum. "In this memorandum," Dobroszycki writes,

> Frank admits that German rule in the GG had recently come up against the increasingly active resistance of broad masses of the Polish people. This was the result, he concluded, of a policy of starvation, resettlement, exploitation, mass arrests and mass shootings, and persecution of the church, as well as a well-advanced paralysis of cultural life. In this situation, the Germans lost the possibility of drawing Polish society into the struggle against Bolshevism which Frank considered imperative and saw as a realistic goal, especially after the circulation of the DNB [Deutschenachrichtenbureau] report on the murder of a few thousand Polish officers by Russians at Katyn, near Smolensk.

However, both Hitler and Himmler were opposed to any concessions to the Poles, and it was only in February 1944 that Frank was able to obtain some assurances from Hitler during his visit to the leader's headquarters. But it was late; the battlefront was then moving fast toward the West.

The year 1944 marked the most interesting phase of the German sponsored press in Poland. There were some signs that the Germans were relenting in their cultural policy; a few concerts by Polish musicians as well as theater performances were allowed and praised as steps toward "normalization." Also, instead of insisting on centrally controlled newspapers which

were forbidden to deal with literature and art or to discuss political matters, the Germans made plans for new journals that would be edited by Poles, who would be free to make comments on their own, enter into polemics with Resistance writers, and debate ideological choices. The new press was to coexist with the ordinary adder press. In other words the Nazis attempted to create a journalism of collaborators.

The Nazis at this stage of the war emphasized the theme of Germany as the unifying protector of Europe from Soviet communism—a theme that was promoted in various occupied countries with different degrees of success. A crusading anti-Bolshevik spirit was supposed to animate the foreign military units fighting in Russia along with the German army, whether they were Italian, Hungarian, Belgian, or Romanian. Throughout German-dominated Europe a number of writers and journalists, mainly from the circles of prewar, anti-democratic parties, were engaged in converting people to "the European cause." Even if they did not necessarily consider Nazi Germany as a model to follow, they denounced the corruption inherent in parliamentarianism and praised the authoritarian rule of Mussolini and Franco. The collaborationist press in France had such well-known writers as Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Robert Brasillach; in Norway Knut Hamsun supported the occupiers; in Italy the New Order had Ezra Pound among its defenders.

While in Western Europe the choice seemed to be between the return of corrupt capitalist democracy and a more authoritarian system, in the East the defeat of Germany promised the triumph of Soviet communism. And plenty of East Europeans dreaded this more than anything else because they had tasted it in prisons and gulags—as had many Russians and Ukrainians. Today their hesitations about which line to follow and the choices they made that proved to be wrong are buried in the archives. Nobody seems to remember, as I do, that one of the best wartime periodicals in Europe was published in Berlin by a group of pro-German Russian émigrés who, writing in Russian, managed somehow to keep their distance from the Nazis and smuggle into their paper much more information than was usual in the German language press.

That the Soviet Union had hostile intentions toward Poland was obvious enough. The USSR's announced aim was to bring agrarian reform, peace, and well-being to Poland, but behind that façade the Soviet regime planned either to turn the country into a seventeenth Soviet republic or to convert it into a satellite state. With Germany losing the war, some rightists may have been tempted to ask themselves whether some kind of accommodation with this weakened power would not be better than relying on Stalin's good will. It is worth keeping in mind as well that the attempt on Hitler's life by German aristocrats and military officers in July 1944 might have been successful; and in that case a separate peace between Germany and the Western allies, something Stalin dreaded, would have been probable.

During 1944, the critical year for the Germans, the folly of Nazi policy in Eastern Europe during the preceding years was glaringly revealed. Nazi ideology classifying Eastern Europeans as "subhuman" forced the Germans to reject offers from local leaders who promised their cooperation in exchange for a measure of independence. The Germans failed either to create an independent Ukraine able to defend itself or an anti-Soviet Russian faction on Russian soil. Instead, their cruel behavior turned against them entire populations that had been favorable to them when they first took over Soviet-occupied territory. Now, in 1944, the German administration tried to repair the damage but it was already too late.

In Poland Governor Frank's office looked for serious writers who would be ready to publish their own periodicals favorable to the German cause. Yet most of the possible candidates would not accept his offer. To mention only one example, the eminent novelist Józef Mackiewicz, from Wilno (Vilnius), a city which before the war belonged to Poland, was a fervent and declared enemy of Soviet communism and saw in it a mortal danger threatening all nations of Europe. Brought up within Russian culture, he admired pre-revolutionary Russia; thus his attitude to the USSR was not based on chauvinistic animosity. In fact, he was a conservative, preoccupied mainly with opposing Bolshevism. He mistrusted the Western allies and reproached the Polish Resistance Home Army for working indirectly with the Soviets; its networks gathered military intelligence that was transferred to the London émigré government and then, through the British, reached the Soviet army. He believed in working out some sort of accommodation with the German army, if not with the German system.

And yet, in spite of those views, he did not join the German side. Invited by the Germans to the site of the Katyn massacre, he was convinced that it was a Soviet crime. His description of what he saw there belongs in the canon of writings on horrors of the twentieth century, together with his pages on the mass murder of Jews in Ponary near Vilnius. However, characteristically enough, he went to Katyn with the permission of the underground authorities; the fear of being accused of treason by his compatriots was a strong restraining factor.

At last two men—Jan Emil Skiwski and Feliks Rybicki—responded favorably to the German proposal and began publishing a magazine, *Przelom* (*Breakthrough*), in the spring of 1944. One wonders about their motives, especially Skiwski's—Rybicki, though known as a journalist, was not highly regarded. But Skiwski was a talented literary critic, a respected figure in prewar Warsaw, as well as a declared admirer of Mussolini's fascism and a critic of Western democracies. During the war he did not hide his belief in the victory of the Axis countries. He could not publish his views: the adder press did not need sophisticated contributors, and his ideas were anathema to the clandestine press.

Skiwski was completely different from the usual breed of collaborators in many countries, who were attracted mainly by the prospect of gain. His commitment was purely ideological. In occupied Warsaw he led a pauper's life, on the verge of starvation. At a

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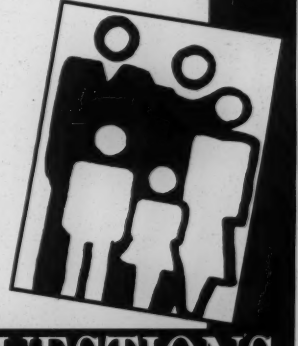

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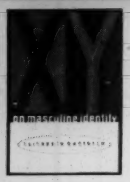

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time when it was obvious that Germany had already lost the war, such a man could not have become editor of a pro-German magazine for personal profit. His aim was to address a desperate warning to his compatriots, a call not to expect liberation by the Soviets but to be prepared to resist enslavement by them.

Today we know the names of writers the Germans proposed to work on *Breakthrough*. All except Rybicki and Skiwski refused. Dobroszycki quotes a conversation between one of Governor Frank's officials, Ohlenbush, and Wladyslaw Studnicki, a maverick in Polish political life, who in the past was always openly pro-German:

> *Ohlenbush:* Frank is now very friendly to Poland and the Poles. He asked me to ask you what he can do for the Poles at this moment.
>
> *Studnicki:* He should pack his bags and leave Poland.
>
> *Ohlenbush:* What!? Generalgouverneur Frank has come to know Poland and the Poles; he has dropped his prejudices and gained a certain sympathy.
>
> *Studnicki:* Someone who has carried out a policy of extermination for years, deported our farmers, brought in Germans from other countries and wanted to create colonial relations, even when he wants to pursue other policies, no longer finds any trust and even the friendliest statements will encounter disbelief and leave a bad taste.

Breakthrough, a biweekly, was one of nine periodicals that deserved to be called "collaborationist." It presented, Professor Dobroszycki writes, a relatively sophisticated political view. Its underlying thesis was that in the present world the sovereignty of individual small and medium-sized states is obsolete and no longer corresponds to historical reality. The only state that can be completely independent must be able to guarantee the security of the nation and its cultural and material value in case of war. Poland by itself could not and would not be such a country.

As Dobroszycki justly comments, such an argument, referring to the "geopolitical" location of Poland between Germany and Russia, sounded abstract at a time when a struggle for survival was taking place—the Poles suspected that in case of a German victory they, in turn, would become victims of a final solution.

The adder press itself was a dull affair of German propaganda offices, and Dobroszycki's account of it is less interesting to me than his account of the Poles who collaborated with the Nazis during the final phase of the war. Their thinking takes us back to the great wave of disillusionment with democracy that spread over Europe during the Thirties, after the American crisis of 1929. There were hidden links between the fascists, who worshiped violence as a source of political power, and their Marxist adversaries. That affinity was suggested by Thomas Mann in his novel *The Magic Mountain*, in which the totalitarian, demonic Jesuit Naphta was presumably modeled upon the Hungarian Marxist philosopher Georg Lukacs. And Pierre Drieu la Rochelle was a friend of André Malraux.

Among those who collaborated for ideological reasons there was often something both tragic and pathetic. In Poland Jan Emil Skiwski has been largely forgotten but still the enigma of his decision invites speculation. It is difficult to understand how a cultivated man, at home with the European humanist tradition, completely lost his way when confronted with crimes that were so horrible the mind could not fully register them. Perhaps Ezra Pound, speaking on the radio from Rome, did not visualize what his ideas meant in practice when applied by the masters of Europe to their slaves. Yet Skiwski was writing his articles in Cracow, a few miles from Auschwitz. He lived in hiding, for he had been sentenced to death by the Polish underground. He could be seen, according to some accounts, only after an exchange of coded messages and an appointment was made to meet him in a German army canteen.

Drieu la Rochelle committed suicide in 1945. Robert Brasillach was sentenced to death and executed after a trial that left doubts about its juridical correctness. Ezra Pound, captured by the American army, was locked in a cage. Skiwski escaped from Poland to Germany and under an assumed name migrated to Venezuela, where he earned his living as a librarian and where he died.

Lucjan Dobroszycki is also the author of a monumental book, *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto, 1941–1944.** Among the Polish Jews of his generation who survived the Second World War, some pursued a scholarly career in Poland as he did. Jan Błoński's book, which I mentioned earlier, dedicates a chapter to "The Jewish School in Polish Literature," i.e., to those who write in Polish and chose the search for their Jewish identity as their main theme. In those writers, whether of the older generation—Adolf Rudnicki, Julian Stryjkowski—or the much younger writers who were saved as children—Bogdan Wojdowski, Henryk Grynberg, Piotr Matywiecki, Stanislaw Benski—their very awareness, as both Poles and Jews, of what might seem an impossible situation had been a driving force in their work. Theirs is a literature arising from a cemetery, a literature of disinheritance, for the rich and centuries-old traditions of the Polish Jews no longer exist.

Professor Dobroszycki is much more fortunate; he is now an American scholar, not a creative writer bound to one tongue. His background has allowed him to choose a field of research requiring a familiarity with languages and local conditions that few other historians possess. As he also did in his book on the ghetto of Łódź he brings to the surface details of a sad phase in the history of Europe that are too readily relegated to the archives. He deserves immense gratitude for revealing the unsuspected and tragically absurd complexities behind the destruction carried out by the Nazis. He has been able to do so by remaining faithful to his roots, and to the truth, and by keeping the memory of the Polish Jews alive. □

*Yale University Press, 1984.

Feast of Pliny

Ingrid D. Rowland

Pliny's Laurentine villa: drawing by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, 1840

The Villas of Pliny from Antiquity to Posterity
by Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey.
University of Chicago Press,
377 pp., $65.00

Among all the ancient Romans who ever lived, an earnest public servant named Caius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, or Pliny the Younger (c. AD 61–113), is one of the few who have offered posterity a glimpse of their personal lives. He has done so in a series of letters, most of them composed between 96 and 113 AD, and addressed to the people who made up his corner of the Roman Empire: his wife, his in-laws, his mentors, his protégés, his friends, and the emperor Trajan, with whom he enjoyed the peculiar kind of friendship an ordinary mortal might have with a person whose titles include "Lord God."

In his own world, Pliny the Younger was an important man; he once held the consulship, the highest elective office in the Roman state, and he died on duty as Trajan's special envoy to the troubled province of Bithynia (in modern Turkey), a sign of that sage emperor's extraordinary trust. Pliny's friends included the historians Tacitus and Suetonius. His uncle, Pliny the Elder, had been a renowned scholar. What makes his letters such fascinating reading, however, is neither his illustrious connections nor his references to the occasional startling event; it is the disarming immediacy of the man himself.

The limitations that kept Pliny the Younger from true greatness, either as a writer or as a statesman, are what make him such a companionable guide through Imperial Rome. Born in a provincial town of northern Italy, Comum (modern Como), and sent to Rome for advanced rhetorical studies and the beginnings of a career in law and politics, he never seemed driven by ambition, and hence he never suffered the agonies over the recognition of his genius that so mark the letters of another provincial boy who made good in the big city, Marcus Tullius Cicero. Pliny is no common man, yet his letters have a way of distilling situations so as to express their essential humanity, whether he is describing panicky neighbors caught in the eruption of Vesuvius, snooty patricians refusing to clap at a poetry reading, or stubborn Christians who cannot find it within themselves to burn a bit of incense to a statue of the Emperor.

Pliny's letters are vividly written, and none of them more so than the two in which he describes his two favorite country houses: the Laurentine villa, a winter retreat at the seaside south of Rome, and the Tuscan villa, a remote summer place high in the foothills of the Apennines. We know nothing about when he acquired these properties, or about how many others he may have had (there were at least two others, both along the shores of Lake Como), nor, with one exception, do we have any idea what his role may have been in their design. That exception is a secluded suite at the end of a long covered hall in his Laurentine villa, which he describes as "my favorite, really my favorite... I put it there myself,"[1] although it is unclear whether Pliny "put it there" as architect, as builder, or simply as the homeowner who commissioned the remodeling of his house.[2] How little we know even this most affable of Romans![3]

Pliny describes his villas in a way that is typical of his eminently social approach to correspondence; both letters are really invitations for friends to stay with him and share his delightful quarters. A congenital enthusiast, he tells how it feels to occupy each of the villas' various rooms, or to move through their rambling successions of chambers, porticoes, courtyards, and gardens.

Deliberate efforts at temptation, Pliny's letters about his villas have lost none of their charm over the succeeding centuries. His invitation to come and stay with him still holds out the promise of idyllic scenery, physical amenity, and a host who will treasure a judicious balance of companionship and solitude. Ever since the Renaissance, scholars and architects have made various attempts, so far with only partial success, to give Pliny's villas more concrete form, scouring the countryside around Castel Fusano and Città di Castello in search of their ruins at places that had acquired the name "Villa di Plinio." More successfully, they have speculated about the villas in written essays, sometimes hewing closely to Pliny's text and sometimes striking off into realms of fantasy. Pierre du Prey's splendid new book traces the impact of Pliny's villas on the visual imagination of architects from the fifteenth century to the present, acknowledging that few of their drawn ruminations are actually reconstructions in any strict archaeological sense. Hence he prefers to write of "restitutions" to convey the sense that these drawings, plans, and models, both reconstructions and fantasies alike, restore definite form to the suggestive impressions from Pliny's letters, and sometimes also to the crumbled concrete foundations that may or may not mark the sites of the ancient author's beloved haunts.

More than an antiquarian exercise, these Plinian "restitutions" get at the heart of what it means for city folk to dwell on the margins of the wilderness. Villas reflect the Romans' ambiguous relationship with civilization as concretely as their naturalistic wall paintings. They longed to be in the countryside, but they longed at the same time to be surrounded with the comforts of society. In form villas might range from modest farmhouses to miniature cities, with race tracks, hall-courts, and baths. They might hover a few paces from a city wall, like the so-called Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, a working farmstead with extensive storerooms, or anchor the outer limits of the Empire, like the villas of Roman Britain, whose owners may have been Roman in name only. Their point, however, was always the same: to retreat from city life in order to gain perspective on it. Seeking out a property for his friend the historian Caius Suetonius Tranquillus, Pliny remarks:

> There is indeed much about this property to whet Tranquillus's appetite if only the price suits him: easy access to Rome, good communications, a modest house, and sufficient land for him to enjoy without taking up too much of his time. Scholars turned landowners, like himself, need no more land than will suffice to clear their heads and refresh their eyes, as they stroll around their grounds and tread their single path, getting to know each one of their precious vines, counting every fruit tree.[4]

Pliny's own standards for a villa were considerably more lavish. His Laurentine villa was a seaside winter retreat situated close enough to Rome for him to reach it by nightfall after a day's work in the Forum. His Tuscan villa, on the other hand, offered genuine retreat from Rome:

> The countryside is very beautiful. Picture to yourself a vast amphitheatre such as could only be a work of nature; the great spreading plain is ringed round by mountains, their summits crowned by ancient woods of tall trees.... Below them the vineyards spreading down every slope weave their uniform pattern far and wide, their lower limit bordered by a plantation of trees. Then come the meadows and cornfields.... It is a great pleasure to look down on the countryside from the mountain, for the view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty, rather than a real landscape, and the harmony to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns.

Pliny approached the description of his villas as he once must have experienced them: in "harmonic variety" (what the Romans called, in Greek, *poikilia*), when he wandered from space to space, environment to environment, each stopping place carefully crafted to heighten some particular aspect of nature and art: silence, noise, water, openness, seclusion, trees, columns, flowers. Du Prey adopts the same organized sense of wandering, a bold risk for a scholarly book, but it works. He pursues themes rather than geographies or chronologies, jumping from ancient Rome to the nineteenth-century Crimea to twentieth-century California in search of "The Four Cardinal Points of a Villa" (which belong not to the magnetic compass but to the human psyche, ideas like "openness and movement," "house and garden"). Pliny's own wanderings within his country properties played similarly free

[1] "...*amores mei, re vera amores: ipse posui.*" Letter II.17. This and all subsequent citations are taken from *Pliny: Letters and Panegyrics*, 2 volumes, translated by Betty Radice (Loeb Classical Library/Harvard University Press, 1969).

[2] Nor is it clear that these distinctions necessarily had meaning in a slave society where a battalion of servants carried out even trivial tasks for their masters. However, the ancient Roman architectural writer Vitruvius notes that some wealthy Romans acted as their own architects and contractors, as did the emperors Nero and Hadrian.

[3] We know, for example, neither the date of his birth nor the date of his death, and virtually nothing of his first two wives.

[4] I.24.

with space and time, leavened as they were by his thoughts, his readings, and the landscapes his rooms sought to enhance by an infinite variety of framings.

In his villas, Pliny could have it all: his books, his ball games, his friends, and at the same time he could marvel at unspoiled vistas (which to his mind might mean a landscape dotted with other villas), and enjoy them in silence. Country houses brought wealthy Romans a sense of communion with the stern agrarian ancestors to whose conservative morality they attributed the steady growth of their empire. For them, the villa's moment of balance between nature and culture became all the more poignant because it was so fragile, and so temporary, and their own distance from rusticity was so complete. Pliny remarks that during his leisurely stays in Tuscany,

> Some time is given over to the tenant farmers—not enough from their standpoint—whose rustic complaints lend luster to our own literary pursuits and such urbane concerns.[5]

By "urbane concerns," this vacationing pillar of Roman society meant a life of enviable literary leisure. He would pass his days in Tuscany by rising at dawn to spend the next three or four hours writing, an activity accomplished by dictating to a secretary. A brisk walk in the garden or along his covered portico would consolidate his ideas, he would dictate again and then go for a drive.[6]

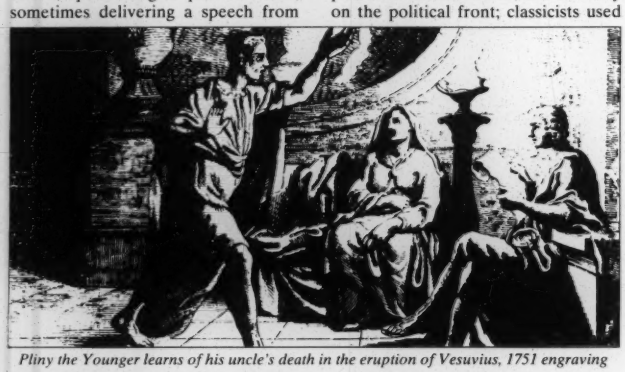
> After a short sleep and another walk I read a Greek or Latin speech aloud and with emphasis, not so much for the sake of my voice as my digestion, though of course both are strengthened by this. Then I have another walk, am oiled, take exercise, and have a bath. If I am dining alone with my wife or a few friends, a book is read aloud during the meal and afterwards we listen to a comedy or some music; then I walk again with the members of my household, some of whom are well educated. Thus the evening is prolonged with varied conversation, and, even when the days are at their longest, comes to a satisfying end.

Ensconced in luxurious surroundings, attended at all times by solicitous slaves, Pliny used his abundant time to participate in public life, to study, and to write. He had been trained all his life to do so. His uncle, Pliny the Elder, had been a fanatic for efficiency, who scolded his nephew for walking when he could have been riding in a litter while a slave read to him; "according to him I need not have wasted those hours, for he thought any time wasted which was not devoted to work."[7] Pliny senior, by the time of his death at fifty-five (he was asphyxiated as he tried to rescue victims during the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79), had filled 107 papyrus volumes with his published writings, of which only the thirty-seven that comprised his *Natural History* survive, a vast compendium of facts about matters animal, vegetable, and mineral.[8] Characteristically, the *Natural History* includes a history of sculpture under its discussion of stone—not quite equating the work of Phidias with that of Spartacus breaking rock in a quarry, but not entirely sensitive to art either.

The younger Pliny, by contrast, nourished some of the artistic sympathies his obsessive uncle lacked. A pupil in Rome of the great rhetorician Quintilian, he had made his real career as a forceful advocate in the law courts, specializing in probate cases, sometimes delivering a speech from memory for six or seven hours on end. As was the case with most Roman patricians, he interspersed this legal career with a succession of increasingly important government posts. In his own life span of fifty-odd years, Pliny junior seems, indeed, to have served ably as magistrate, military officer, and imperial administrator. He began his career under the emperor Domitian (81–96), a vain and capricious man whose plans to arrest Pliny for sedition were happily preempted by an assassin.[9] Thereafter it was Pliny's fortune to pursue his public life under two of the most competent emperors that ancient Rome would ever produce: a seasoned old soldier, Nerva, and his brilliant protégé, Trajan, like Nerva an officer brought up to prominence through the Roman army.

Trajan and Pliny seem to have been rather close friends, an association that shows two instances in which the Roman system worked exactly as it was designed to: these two talented provincial boys reached the highest offices in the state through military service on the one hand, and through the combination of liberal education, the study of law, and the pursuit of elected office on the other. At their best, as the lives of these men make clear, both avenues provided effective training for assuming public responsibility, a training that seems in their particular cases to have been abetted as well by the influence of several strongly principled women. Thus both Trajan and Pliny retained a basic faith in Roman institutions and traditional Roman virtues at a time when other observers, like their contemporary Tacitus, saw little but corruption.

In many respects, this period of the Empire represented one of the high points of ancient Rome, and not only on the political front; classicists used to recognize its merits by the term "Silver Age" to indicate a flowering of verbal exuberance second only to the "Golden Age" initiated by the emperor Augustus.[10] Pliny's letters are filled with the names of contemporary authors, some still famous, some now as elusive as most of the details about Pliny himself. Nine papyrus scrolls of his correspondence, selected and edited by the author, were circulating before the year 111, when Trajan sent him to Bithynia as a caretaker governor. There, somewhere near modern Istanbul, he seems to have died in 113. Posthumously, his widow, Calpurnia, released a tenth scroll of letters containing his official correspondence with the emperor.



Pliny the Younger learns of his uncle's death in the eruption of Vesuvius, 1751 engraving

Ancient Roman papyrus "books" each contained about the same amount of text as a modern chapter. Readers unrolled them in sections; dropping one section could create a disastrous mess. The texts, whether in Greek or Latin, were written entirely in capital letters without divisions between words, for which reason most ancient readers audibly sounded out what they had before them.[11] The elder Pliny employed a battery of readers to edify his mealtimes, his baths, and his journeys; Pliny the Younger gave advance deliveries of his forensic speeches to check them for errors. Aside from attending public readings of new work, sociable Romans might join in reading groups to declaim a text in shifts. Libraries in the bilingual Roman Empire must have harbored a rich background noise of polyglot murmur.

However, even in a modern reader's private silence, the letters of the younger Pliny seem to speak audibly. They range in length from a few lines to several modern pages, all carefully crafted, yet irrepressibly intimate. From what we know of their identities, we find that his correspondents, by and large, adhere to his own values of hard work, civic devotion, and care of family. They are certainly not Rome's most glamorous citizens, but they have done well, and under Trajan's careful administration their outlook is deservedly optimistic. Still, among his friends, the younger Pliny must have been a singularly sunny soul. His letters of recommendation (indispensable for penetrating the Imperial bureaucracy) bubble with the same kind of enthusiasm his more sobersided colleagues deplored in his social behavior—

> You say that people have criticized me in your hearing for taking any opportunity for exaggerated praise of my friends... My friends may not be all I proclaim them, but it makes me happy to think they are.[12]

A letter to his wife, Calpurnia, begins simply: "You cannot believe how much I miss you."[13] Other letters recount gossip, tell ghost stories, comment on literature, explore wonders of nature like the Fountain of Clitumnus or the floating islands of Lake Vadimon. The most famous are the two that describe the eruption of Vesuvius and the death of the Elder Pliny, an exchange with Trajan about how to deal with the Christians in Bithynia, and, of course, the two letters about villas that first provided the inspiration for Pierre du Prey's monograph.

For the Silver Age of Latin literature was a Golden Age of architecture. Here, too, Trajan and Pliny met on common ground. Trajan's projects with Apollodorus of Damascus, his Forum, Markets, and Column, still dominate the center of modern Rome; the principles of architecture they explored are evident today in everything from basilicas to shopping malls.[14]

It is the combination of Pliny's legacy as public servant and his association with superb architecture that inspired urban magnates like the Medici to create their own villas, patterning their experience of country life on Pliny's own complex response to city, country, and ancestral tradition. In the twentieth century, the dream of physical comfort coexisting in harmony with nature (and a certain sense of hard work well rewarded with which both Pliny and Cosimo de' Medici would have empathized) has spawned the Plinian microcosms of suburbia—perhaps even something of the sprawling plan of the modern American ranch-style house. One of the chief subtexts to Du Prey's book is an exploration of the extent to which the idea of villas, and the Classical idiom in general, apply to architecture in the present day. But his chief objective is to identify good design: structures that make the most of their natural settings, rooms that permit an easy flow

[5] IX.36: "*Datur et colonis, ut videtur ipsis, non satis temporis, quorum mihi agrestes querelae litteras nostras et haec urbana opera commendant.*" The translations of Radice ("the boorishness of their complaints," p. 157) and James Ackerman ("boorish quibbles," p. 37) probably give too negative an emphasis to the adjective "*agrestis*."

[6] Letter IX.36.

[7] Letter III.

[8] His other works, cited in Letter III.5, included *Throwing the Javelin from Horseback* (one volume), *The Life of Pomponius Secundus* (2 volumes), *The German Wars* (20 volumes), *The Scholar* (3 volumes: an oratorical handbook), *Problems in Grammar* (8 volumes: "This he wrote during Nero's last years when the slavery of the times made it dangerous to write anything at all independent or inspired"), *A Continuation of the History of Aufidius Bassus* (31 volumes). He also bequeathed his nephew 160 scrolls of miscellaneous notes.

[9] A spectacular bust of Domitian in the Toledo Museum of Art is particularly telling: it shows the balding emperor with a slipping toupee and a slightly loopy expression, all done with the highest degree of technical skill.

[10] Current practice favors the neutral term "Imperial Latin."

[11] Silent readers like Julius Caesar and Saint Ambrose were regarded as exceptional on this count alone.

[12] VII. 28.1–2.

[13] VII.5.

[14] His Forum is about to receive spectacular treatment by James Packer, in *The Forum of Trajan in Rome: A Study of the Monuments*, to be published in 1996 by the University of California Press.

of traffic, windows that admit light in the right amounts yet serve effectively to frame the scenery outside. All of these qualities seem to have been developed to an inspired degree in Pliny's villas. More than a survey of glorious country houses, *The Villas of Pliny* presents a long view of what it means to build, not only architecture, but society itself.

The imaginative reconstruction of Pliny's villas began with the Italian Renaissance, inspired by the same terrain that Pliny had evoked with such affection. Roman nostalgia for a rustic past harmonized well with a congenitally longing soul like that of Petrarch, who retired toward the end of the fourteenth century to a villa at Arquà Petrarca, above Padua, which allowed him to end his life as both Plinys had hoped to end theirs: in full rustic retreat from a life of civil service, with his books and his cat for company.[15] The visually imposing ruins of Roman villas, which dotted the countryside from Campania to Como, harmonized no less perfectly with the brash architects of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who put their faith in modern mathematics and archaeological scrutiny to chase down the secrets of classical proportion.

The Renaissance was also an age of manuscript studies, and as it happened, an age-old problem in the copying of Pliny's manuscript text led to a delicious architectural comedy of errors in the early sixteenth century. Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, nephew of Lorenzo the Magnificent and cousin to the reigning pope, Leo X, commissioned a villa on the outskirts of Rome from Raphael, at that time the papal city's favorite artist. Never a man to say no, Raphael took the commission when he was already deeply involved in two antiquarian projects: a reconstruction of ancient Rome as it had been in Imperial times, and an illustrated Italian translation of ancient Rome's one surviving architectural treatise, the *Ten Books on Architecture* of Vitruvius, composed between about 30 and 20 BC. One version of Pliny's letter on the Laurentine villa noted that the building's forecourt was shaped like the letter "O," and a manuscript with this reading seems to have been the one to which Raphael referred when drawing up his designs for the Medici villa, which went so far as to include a hippodrome like that of Pliny's Tuscan villa. A second manuscript tradition, which is almost certainly more correct, sees "D" rather than "O" as the shape of Pliny's court (there are several scripts in which a rounded "D" could have been misread and mistranscribed during the Middle Ages). As it happened, Raphael's plans for Cardinal Giulio were never completed; the circular forecourt was left half-built, and today the Medici villa, known as Villa Madama, exhibits a philologically correct if unintentional semicircular concave façade: a "D" in place of an "O" after all.

It was the very elusiveness of Pliny's descriptions that so sparked the fantasies of Renaissance artists like Raphael, or Baldassare Peruzzi, who designed a villa in 1511 for another of Raphael's patrons, the Sienese merchant banker Agostino Chigi, who had taken up permanent residence in Rome. Unhampered, like Raphael, by precise architectural detail, Peruzzi, too, aimed instead for Plinian atmosphere: framed views of the Tiber, the Vatican, and a secluded garden, as well as an unusual entrance through an open loggia, a space which Raphael's workshop would eventually decorate in 1518. One wonders how the decorous Pliny (or Peruzzi himself, for that matter, hard at work upstairs on a lively trompe l'oeil perspective for Chigi's winter dining room) would have taken to the fresco that Raphael chose to surmount Chigi's office door: a naked Mercury, patron of merchants and thieves, holding Fame's trumpet in one hand and with the other gesturing toward a garland where a phallic gourd plunges into a ripened fig. On the other hand, one of Pliny's letters mourns the death of the frequently obscene epigrammatist Martial with true feeling. He might have laughed as hard as Agostino Chigi to watch the awkward agonies of a timid visitor approaching the richest man in Rome under so peculiar an image.

Renaissance villa dwellers, even the irrepressible Agostino Chigi, cultivated ancient Roman virtues as assiduously—and with the same incurable anachronism—as their Roman forebears, and in the same terrain. In the late sixteenth century, Andrea Palladio, perhaps the greatest villa designer of all time, flung long Plinian porticoes across the flatlands of the Veneto, and created the four-faceted Villa Rotonda, whose identical façades survey the view from a hilltop site that permits it to "see and be seen" in truly Roman style. Eventually, however, this terrain itself would prove to be interchangeable with that of seemingly inhospitable climes, when the idea of *villeggiatura*, or villa-dwelling, spread to England, Prussia, the Crimea, Virginia, Ontario (not to mention the Getty Museum at Malibu, which partially replicates the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum). One of the most gifted architects to try his hand at restitution was Germany's Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel's 1838 project at Orianda in the Crimea drew much of its imposing beauty from the architect's earlier attempts to wrestle in images with revisualizing the Plinian texts. Like most of the architects who have ever tried to bring Pliny's villas to life, he began his work directly from the sense-impressions recorded in those ancient Latin letters rather than the reconstructions proposed by fellow architects.

Villeggiatura spread as well across class lines. Just as the humble city-bound dwellers of Pompeii and Herculaneum evoked the idea of villa life by painting the walls of their shops with a still life or a garden scene, so, too, in the 1980s, the American architect Thomas Gordon Smith transformed a series of California bungalows into Mediterranean hideaways replete with classical columns, elaborate door and window frames, Greek triglyphs and metopes—but all done up in vivid pinks and blues more reminiscent of Mexico than of ancient

[15]The cat's skeleton is still preserved there.

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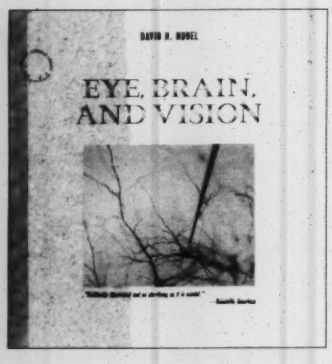

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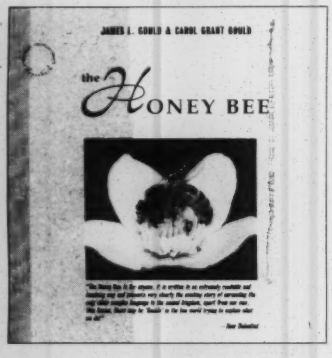

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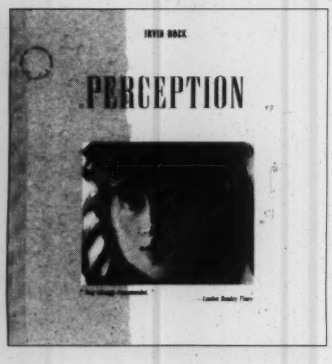

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W.H. FREEMAN

Rome. Of Smith's Richmond Hill house, Du Prey asks:

> What does it really achieve? A love of sun, shade, vegetation, views, breezes, freedom of movement, and the artistic will to synthesize all these...

These Plinian retreats in suburban American neighborhoods also manage to achieve a kind of democracy that it would be facile to decry as bourgeois. Smith decorated the living room of the Richmond Hill house with pseudo-Pompeiian frescoes of American gas stations, because the panoramic view from the same room's picture window takes in the refinery tanks along San Francisco Bay. Pliny drew delight from the sight of neighboring villas in the landscape; in a wry twist on post-industrial Arcadia, Richmond Hill does much the same in twentieth-century style.

With this and a host of other examples, *The Villas of Pliny* makes a powerful recurrent case for freedom of movement in an imaginative sense, demonstrating without declaring it that the meticulous presentation and narrowly conceived classicism of nineteenth-century French Beaux-Arts drawings often detracted from the creation of workable architecture, whereas the messy sketches of more practical designers have resulted in some truly sublime buildings.

To these sublime buildings the classical idiom per se—at least classical architecture conceived as this kind of column, that kind of doorframe—is often a secondary concern. The book's penultimate section details an exhibit, first mounted in 1982, of new drawings based on the theme of Pliny's Laurentine villa. The show's originator, the French architect Maurice Culot, hoped that an inspired body of contemporary work would demonstrate the timeless veracity of classical architecture in what turned out to be the last days of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's conservative government. A series of drawings, executed by a diverse group of thirteen designers, included the archaeological architect Jean-Pierre Adam, the visionary architect Léon Krier, and the socially conscious architects Treuttel, Garcias, and Treuttel among their ranks. Their entries ranged in form from Adam's archaeological reconstruction, based on his years of experience with excavating Roman sites, to more unfettered musings (and the attendant tendency of such architects' fantasies toward self-indulgence).

Adam's reconstruction of Pliny's Laurentine villa makes it clear that, to his mind, Roman classicism had rather little to do with producing symmetrical boxes; ancient rooms were often quadrilateral but seldom strictly rectangular, and the plans of the buildings themselves could be sprawling improvisations that still maintained the impression of strictly controlled harmony. Adam thus reveals Beaux-Arts symmetry as an entirely post-classical construct, despite its cramping effects on the study of classical architecture and the practice of postmodern and neoclassical architecture in our own day. Krier's contribution, a portfolio of drawings, suggests that what holds for villa planning may translate without effort into planning for a contemporary town, proving that urban values are necessarily latent in the world of a man as urbane as Pliny.

Truettel, Garcias, and Treuttel's reconstruction drawing emphasizes areas of Pliny's villas that his own description omits: the slave quarters, the kitchen, the stables, with small vignettes showing the miserable lives that made patrician luxury possible. Next to this drawing, the plan of a modern villa built on the same Plinian lines draws inescapable analogies to present-day capitalist society. This admittedly disturbing aspect of villa life has been explored in earnest since the 1970s, with the publication of Bentmann and Müller's *Die Villa als Herrschaftsarchitektur*[16] and with archaeological excavations like Andrea Carandini's at the Roman villa of Settefinestre, where the excesses of the ancient Romans were analyzed from a Marxist viewpoint.

But exploitation and social injustice were—and are—only part of the picture. Pliny, for all his considerable charms, was irreducibly unlike us in certain ways. As the Swedish philologist Magnus Wistrand puts it, we are irresistibly drawn to asking our Romans, "How could they?" Pliny held slaves, and tortured them to extract evidence. He approved of gladiator shows in the belief that they inspired their spectators to fortitude. He put confessing Christians to death, "for, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished."[17]

Du Prey, unlike the team of Treuttel, Garcias, and Treuttel, does not preach when dealing with the difficult aspect of ancient Rome and its artistic legacy. Rather, he presents thought-provoking material in such a way as to encourage the reader's own wandering freedom of speculation. *The Villas of Pliny* presents a strong circumstantial case in favor of the real values, both spiritual and aesthetic, that can be found in the unending attempt to realize contradictory hopes: to have the city in the country, a stately home for everyone, and a human race that lives as part of nature without sacrificing its delight in artifice. Postmodern irony is an arid substitute for such rich cases of oxymoron.

In the end, the simple pleasures that Pliny took in his villas involve feelings accessible to all human beings. Housing arrangements on every level of the ancient Roman social scale strive after the same qualities of experience as Pliny's favorite villas. Most of all, however, Pierre du Prey shows that what Pliny sought and found in his two beloved villas are values of contemporary importance. We may often approach these values now by different means, but light, space, domestic tranquility, and a sense of harmony with nature are no less desirable now than they were in the first century of the Roman Empire. □

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[16] Frankfurt, 1970. Now published as *The Villa as Hegemonic Architecture*. See also James S. Ackerman, *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*. The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 34 (Princeton University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 10–18, 35–61.

[17] X.96. See also Magnus Wistrand, *Entertainment and Violence in Ancient Rome: The attitudes of Roman writers of the first century A.D.; Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis* (Göteborg, 1992), pp. 15–16.

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Terry Dintenfass Gallery 50 West 57th Street, NYC, 581-2268. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *Sidney Goodman: Recent Work on Paper.* Through April 29. *Nina Levy: Recent Sculpture.* May 4 through June 9. *Robert Andrew Parker: Recent Watercolors.* (Side Gallery) May 18 through June 23.

E. M. Donahue Gallery 560 Broadway, 3rd floor, NYC, 226-1111. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-6. *Marjorie Welish: Small Higher Valley Series of Paintings.* The Gallery is proud to announce the opening of the second one-person show at the Gallery for Marjorie Welish. The respected critic and art historian who has been a painter for many years will reveal her talent and skills with the unveiling of the *Small Higher Valley* series. The paintings are bold, pop, painterly, humorous, and generally joyful in a strained, intellectual manner. Through June 3. Reception: April 29, 6-8.

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Frumkin/Adams Gallery 50 West 57th Street, NYC, 757-6655. Tuesday through Friday, 10-6; Saturday, 10-5:30. *Luis Cruz Azaceta: New Paintings.* These new works are quite different from the coloristic works he showed two years ago in that they use very little color and consist of essentially earth colors and black. Each painting consists of a single large image and a relating (or contrasting) word, written large in the painting. The paintings are all dotted with polaroids which depict related or contrasting scenes, and these are varnished into the surface of the paintings. May 2 through May 27.

Janos Gat Gallery 572 Fifth Avenue, NYC, 354-4402. Tuesday through Saturday, 2-6, or by appointment. *Julian Beck: Paintings. Carol Ross: Sculpture.* One of the original group of abstract expressionists, the painter Julian Beck has been eclipsed by the Julian Beck of the stage, a self-inflicted break from a flourishing artistic career due to political considerations. This show is a first step towards re-establishing himself as one of the original visionaries of the late Forties and early Fifties living and working in New York. In his canvasses playfulness and irreverence show as classic forms. Carol Ross's sculptures are monuments, which use ancient imagery, and are at once self-sufficient and site-specific. Through May 4.

James Goodman Gallery 41 East 57th Street, Suite 802, NYC, 593-3737. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30; Monday by appointment. *20th-century Modern and Contemporary Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper by Botero, de Kooning, Dubuffet, de Saint Phalle, Frankenthaler, Léger, Lichtenstein, Mangold, Matisse, Miró, Moore, Motherwell, Picasso, Warhol,* and *Wesselmann.*

Sidney Janis Gallery 110 West 57th Street, NYC, 586-0110. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *Tom Wesselmann: Recent 3-D Paintings.* Wesselmann's most complex exploration of the cut-out surface, with overlapping, curving planes of color. The exhibition themes include landscapes, nudes, and still lifes. Wesselmann has recently had large, one-man shows in Paris, Seoul, Singapore, and Tokyo, and is the subject of a European Retrospective, currently on tour. A fully illustrated catalogue of his new work at the Janis Gallery is available. The exhibition runs in New York through June 10.

Kouros Gallery 23 East 73rd Street, NYC, 288-5888. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-6. *Kris Cox: The Halcyon Rings Series.* The Post-Minimalist paintings of Kris Cox's *Halcyon Rings Series* employ basic elements of geometric abstraction as symbols for concepts about our interpretations of the temporal world. Cox uses square grid structures to serve as metaphor for the intangible notion of memory; while the incrementally composed rhythmic concentric rings serve as reference to the abstract concept of time. May 4 through May 27.

Matthew Marks Gallery 1018 Madison Avenue, NYC, 861-9455. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *Pablo Picasso: Works from the rue des Grands-Augustins Studio, 1937-47.* April 29 through June 24. Matthew Marks Gallery at 522 West 22nd Street, NYC, 243-1650. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *Richard Serra: To Whom it May Concern.* April 28 through June 25.

Bill Maynes Contemporary Art 225 Lafayette Street at Spring Street, Room 302, NYC, 431-3952. Tuesday through Friday, 11-6; Saturday, 11-5. *Win Knowlton: "trees".* New sculpture. May 11 through June 10.

Jason McCoy, Inc. 41 East 57th Street, NYC, 319-1996. Monday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *John Newman: Recent Sculpture.* Through June 3.

Pierpont Morgan Library 29 East 36th Street, NYC, 685-0008. Tuesday through Friday, 10:30-5; Saturday, 10:30-6; Sunday, 12-6. *The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination, 1450-1550.* This historic loan exhibition brings together over 100 of the most important extant works from approximately 24 collections throughout the world, including the Farnese Hours. Through May 7. *Animals as Symbol in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts.* In the Middle Ages, animals were invested with symbolic meanings ranging from the divine to the demonic. This exhibition uses examples from the Library's collection to explore the various types of animal imagery found in medieval art. Through September 3.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art 583 Broadway, NYC, 219-1355. Wednesday through Sunday, 12-6; Saturday, 12-8. The Museum celebrates its exhibition and programs with a *Gala Benefit, Auction, & Exhibition* featuring works by over 150 emerging and established artists such as Nayland Blake, Louise Bourgeois, Renée Cox, Nan Goldin, Oliver Herring, Suzanne McClelland, and William Wegman. The Gala is held at The Rainbow Room on April 30. Artworks in the Auction are presented in an extended exhibition entitled *Human/Nature* at the Museum through May 18, and is free to the public.

The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum 32-37 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, (718) 204-7088. Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday, 11-6. The Museum, bordering on the East River, houses over 300 works by the world-renowned sculptor. On display are sculptures and documentation of his gardens, playgrounds, fountains, and stage sets. The Museum is comprised of 12 galleries, an outdoor sculpture garden, and a viewing room, designed by the artist, showing videos on Noguchi's work. On weekends, a shuttle-bus service from Park Avenue and 70th Street in Manhattan will leave every hour on the half hour from 11:30. Call (718) 204-7088 for information.

Nolan/Eckman Gallery 560 Broadway, 6th floor, NYC, 925-6190. Tuesday through Friday, 10-6; Saturday, 11-6. *Barry Le Va: Pages From A Sketchbook: Japanese Lacquerware.* Through May 6. This exhibition features drawings by the sculptor Barry Le Va, in which he explores a connection to the classical forms of Japanese Lacquerware. The core of his work is explained through drawings that express a unique attitude toward form and dimension. A sculpture by Le Va is included in the Whitney Biennial. *Lacquerware by Six Artists from Japan: K. Isaboro, N. Yoshikatso, I. Takashi, T Hiromi, Y. Hideaki, S. Shigeru.* Through May 7. Handmade using centuries-old traditional methods, these beautiful objects are sculptural as well as utilitarian. The lacquerware is colored red and black, and includes bowls and vessels for sake, elaborate tiered boxes, and small eating tables.

The Parks Gallery 106 Dona Luz, Taos, NM 87571, (505) 751-0343. Monday through Saturday, 10-5. Six new works by Melissa Zink from her ongoing series *The Book People.* Zink uses computer technology to create images of classical authority. Through May. Write or call for photos.

Phoenix Gallery 568 Broadway, Suite 607, NYC, 226-8711. Tuesday through Saturday, 11-5:30. *Joan Goldsmith: Layered Canvasses.* Through May 20. Opening reception: Saturday, April 29, 6-8.

Ricco/Maresca Gallery 152 Wooster Street, NYC. 780-0071. Tuesday through Saturday, 11-6. *Dick Brooks: Transit.* A haunting series of 'subway' paintings by a self-taught artist and film maker from Brooklyn. Through May 20. *Laura Craig McNellis.* McNellis is a mentally-retarded artist from Nashville, born in 1957. She works on newsprint with tempera and watercolors. May 25 through June 24.

Rosenberg + Kaufman Fine Art 115 Wooster Street, NYC, 431-4838. Tuesday through Saturday, 11-6, and by appointment. *Peter Wayne Lewis.* This Jamaica-born artist's first New York solo exhibition will feature new abstract paintings from *The Blue Swan Suite.* His visual language is informed by his diverse cultural heritage and is strongly influenced by music, particularly jazz. Lewis describes the work as "isostatic form, generating symphonic pulsations of time, light (color), and liquid space." The artist will give a talk about his work; please call for information. Through May 20. *Paint & Paper.* A group exhibition featuring work by Cheryl Goldsleger, Robert Kuszek, Ronnie Landfield, Dennis Pinette, Claire Seidl, and others. Opens May 23.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery 24 West 57th Street, NYC, 247-0082. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-6. *Charles Seliger: The 1940s & 1990s.* The Gallery's fourth exhibition of Charles Seliger's small-scale paintings and watercolors. The show will illustrate the artist's life-long exploration of organic abstraction. *Burgoyne Diller: Pioneer of Abstraction* is the first New York exhibition of Burgoyne Diller's art since his 1990 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Through June 3.

Luise Ross Gallery 50 West 57th Street, NYC, 307-0400. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-5:30. *Louis Monza: Paintings and Sculpture, 1950-1965.* The paintings, which are from the 1950's, and terra cotta sculpture of the self-taught artist Louis Monza (1897-1984) demonstrate both a forthright and straightforward commentary on contemporary American society as well as a highly complex and variegated artistic vocabulary that is traceable to the artist's biography, but at the same time, transcends it. Through May 13.

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc. 20 East 79th Street, NYC, 879-6606. Tuesday through Saturday, 9:30-5:30. *Paintings by Arnold Friedman, Marsden Hartley, and Alfred Maurer.* The Gallery is please to announce an exhibition of paintings by three American artists, Arnold Friedman, Marsden Hartley, and Alfred Maurer. May 2 through June 30.

School of Visual Arts Events at SVA: *Yugo Next: An Auto Show as Art Form.* On view at Grand Central Terminal Main Gallery. May 2 through May 26. Reception: May 1, 6-8. *Open Studio Exhibition* on view at Graduate Studios, 141 West 21st Street, 9th floor. May 11 through May 13. Reception: May 11, 5-9. *Interior Design Thesis Exhibition* on view at National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South. May 15 through May 31. Reception: May 16, 6-8. Call 592-2011 for information.

Anita Shapolsky Gallery 99 Spring Street, NYC, 334-9755. Wednesday through Saturday, 11-6; Tuesday by appointment. Gallery I: *Ernest Briggs, Clement Meadmore, William Saroyan.* Gallery II: *Group Show: J. Bohary, R. Draffen, C. Hunt, H. Leigh, O. Rayo, S. Twardowicz, E. Van der Grijn.* The Gallery is proud to present the first American showing of abstract paintings and drawings of the 1960s by renowned writer, the late William Saroyan, and powerful abstract works of the same period by Ernest Briggs and Clement Meadmore. April 29 through June 3.

Shepherd Gallery 21 East 84th Street at Madison Avenue, NYC, 861-4050. Tuesday through Saturday, 10-6. *French 19th-century Paintings, Drawings, and Watercolors at Shepherd Gallery.* Works from the Gallery's collection, including works by Amaury Duval, Bargue, Carrier-Belleuse, Clairin, Lehmann, Ribot, Scheffer. May 9 through July.

Sotheby's Books and Manuscripts Department 1334 York Avenue, NYC, 606-7385, (fax) 606-7041. Upcoming sales this spring are *Fine Books and Manuscripts including Americana* to be held on 1 June and *The Book as Art: Modern Illustrated Books and Fine Bindings, Part I* to be held on 2 June. Please contact Selby Kiffer or Marsha Malinowski regarding consignments. To order an illustrated catalogue with a credit card, please call (800) 444-3709.

Swann Galleries 104 East 25th Street, NYC, 254-4710. AUCTIONS: May 11: *Art & Architecture Books.* May 18: *18th & 19th Century Literature, Sets & Bindings, Curiosa.* May 25: *16th to 20th Century Prints and Drawings.* June 8: *Maps, Atlases, Decorative Graphics, Ephemera.* June 15: *Autographs.* June 22: *Modern Literature and Photographic Literature.* Please write or call for preview hours, quarterly newsletter, and to order catalogues with absentee bid forms.

Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery Schermerhorn Hall/Columbia University, 116th Street and Broadway, NYC, 854-7288. Wednesday through Saturday, 1-5, through June 3 (closed May 20 & 27). *Six Artists: New Faculty from Visual Arts. Gregory Amenoff, Nancy Bowen, St. Clair Cemin, Stuart Diamond, Jon Kessler, and David True.*

Jan Weiss Gallery 68 Laight Street, NYC. 925-7313. By appointment. Gallery artists including Australian Urban Aboriginal Artists. Also representing Sally Morgan, author of *My Place,* the award-winning biography of three generations of aborigines.

The Women in the Cowshed

An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution
by Partha Dasgupta.
Oxford University Press/Clarendon Press, 661 pp., $55.00; $24.00 (paper)

Alan Ryan

1.

Had I not met Professor Dasgupta, I might have wondered from reading his book whether "Dasgupta" was the name of a large committee or a small research institution. *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution* is a work of encyclopedic learning and matching ambition. It is not just the title of this book that recalls the beginnings of the modern discipline of economics in Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Smith was a moral philosopher, a historian, and a political theorist; *The Wealth of Nations* is among other things a tract on moral philosophy, social change, and the duties of government as well as what we now call economics. *An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution*, as well as being a contribution to development economics, is among other things a tract on moral philosophy and political theory, on the duties of government in developing countries, and on the connections between economic analysis and such disciplines as the science of nutrition. The bibliography runs to eighty densely packed pages, and anyone who had mastered even a small part of that literature would be a distinguished practitioner of modern economics and well informed about a great deal else.

Professor Dasgupta teaches at Cambridge but wants to be read by many people besides graduate students in economics. He therefore spreads his net wide. He is concerned with the economics of extreme poverty, and has a lot to say about undernourishment as both a cause and an effect of poverty, as well as about the problems of soil erosion, the consequences of poorly defined property rights, the place of women's education in tackling problems of overpopulation, and the fate of the unemployed worker in India.

Because he is an economist who understands that economics is often reviled for its narrow view of human motivation—reducing all our hopes, wishes, and fears to the pursuit of "rational self-interest"—Professor Dasgupta wants to incorporate a richer understanding of human experience within economic analysis. And since economists are often complained of for trying to apply "Western" techniques of analysis to societies whose economies are built on habit, tradition, and personal ties rather than the fluid and flexible impersonal transactions of the developed marketplace, he tries to show how the economist's analytical methods illuminate the predicament of landless laborers and villagers facing crop failure in the Indian subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa. All this is done with an unusual combination of boldness and subtlety.

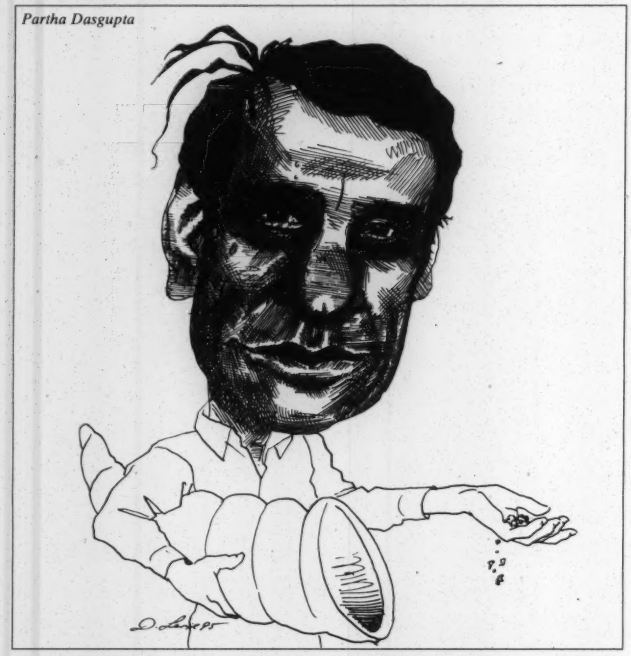
An Inquiry into Well-Being and Destitution raises many questions. One is why books like this are so rare, and so hard to bring off successfully. I should say at once that to the extent that Professor Dasgupta aims at a general audience, he is not wholly successful. His *Inquiry* is a difficult book; it is neither pretentious nor willfully obscure, but it is stiff going. Dasgupta packs the mathematical demonstration of his results into "starred" chapters, but he expects a lot from his readers elsewhere. He gives the impression that he dreams in algebra, and one would do well to read him within reach of a good library.

It is in many ways a sad state of affairs that economics has become so technically forbidding that economists and the lay public have lost touch with each other. Keynes, to look no further back, was no mean logician—his first work was a treatise on probability—but he remained a skeptic about the role of mathematics in economic analysis. It is not irrevelant that he was also a powerful polemicist in public affairs. Dasgupta himself thinks that the contemporary divorce between economics and ethics is particularly unfortunate. Economics began as one of the "moral sciences"—the eighteenth-century term for the human sciences. In nineteenth-century Cambridge the "moral sciences" sheltered philosophy, psychology, politics, and economics. John Stuart Mill discussed the problems of the social sciences under the rubric of "the logic of the moral sciences," and when he wrote his own *Principles of Political Economy*, he added "with some of their applications to social philosophy" to the title.

In Cambridge, Alfred Marshall separated economics from other social studies at the turn of the century, but the economics faculty still shelters political scientists and sociologists. Oxford has never thought it right to allow undergraduates to study economics divorced from philosophy and politics (save in conjunction with engineering and management); the London School of Economics is properly the "London School of Economics and Political Science." In the United States, the emancipation of economics from philosophy, history, and sociology took many years. The domination of the "Chicago School" of Hayek and Milton Friedman during the past thirty years is a wry commentary on the economists of the turn-of-the-century Midwest. They practiced Christian economics, institutional and historical economics, and whatever the most apt label might be for the mordantly skeptical social commentary of Thorstein Veblen.

That economics ought to have some direct bearing on ethical issues seems obviously right and obviously wrong.

Partha Dasgupta



It is obviously right because ethics is concerned with the human search for what does us good; we are constantly trading one good thing for another, trying to get the best possible outcome for ourselves, our families, those to whom we owe duties of various kinds. Economists claim to study rational action. It would be alarming to think that morality had no rational basis.

Yet moral argument is concerned to get people to change their ideas about what is good and bad; economics has no such concern. If Americans become still more frightened of violent crime and buy even more guns, the American Gross National Product will rise; the moralist may complain that the rise in GNP corresponds to no increase in human happiness, but the economist could say that his professional business is only to show how—paradoxically enough—crime can "pay," not just for crooks, but generally.

This division of labor between economics and ethical commentary is not enough for Partha Dasgupta. One of his purposes—he devotes the first hundred and forty pages of the *Inquiry* to it—is to clear economics of the charge that it fosters a passive and "consumerist" moral vision. The charge is made not because economists roundly defend consumerism but because they assume that what matters about human beings is their capacity both to experience pleasure and to make choices that will increase pleasure. The idea that human beings are rational "utility-maximizers" suggests a certain passivity in the economist's idea of the good life, as though a successful life were nothing more than a stream of agreeable sensations. Nobody believes this as a matter of moral conviction; it comes with the discipline, in the way unexamined assumptions usually do. A *reductio ad absurdum* of such theories of the good life was offered by Robert Nozick in one of the more striking images of his *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. If what matters is agreeable sensation, he asked, what would be wrong with a world in which we turned out not to be human beings after all, but brains in vats of an appropriate fluid, wired to have nice sensations? What went on in these brains would include deluded beliefs about the world, but so what?

The hideousness of the image provides the answer. Plainly what we mind about includes truth, engagement with the world, and freedom. Like Amartya Sen, who has also attacked economics' obsession with a passive conception of "welfare," Dasgupta makes much of the idea that "agency"—or freedom—is an indisputable component of the good life. Dasgupta argues not only for the importance of civil liberties, and the "negative" freedoms of liberal, constitutional states, but also for the importance of "positive" liberty—capacities and abilities, the resources people need to make something of their own lives.

Among the payoffs of broadening the range of economic analysis to include these things some are obvious enough. The passive and acquiescent peasants and landless laborers in underdeveloped countries may appear more or less content with their lot. But they are poor in resources; they lack information, energy, access to employment, credit, materials, and markets. More interestingly, perhaps, concentrating on positive liberty underlines for the analyst the importance of the distribution of power within poor households and shifts our gaze from the male head of the family to the capacities and resources of women and children. As we have recently begun to learn, it is there that we have to look for answers to problems of overpopulation and environmental degradation. Simple measures of income per head give us a rough indication of the well-being of families in richer societies, but they tell the development economist very much less than she or he needs to know.

If one of Professor Dasgupta's purposes is to reconnect economics with moral common sense, another is to show that some of the sacrifices that have often been thought necessary for the sake of economic development are not necessary, and that societies that have made them have not profited from them. The most glaring is the sacrifice of civil liberties and the rule of law for the sake of economic growth. A comparison often made is between India and China; in India, democracy has continued to work during the fifty years since independence; famine has been avoided, but economic growth has been slow, and the threat of over-

population and environmental disaster increasingly hangs over the country. In China, there have been several man-made catastrophes during the past half-century costing millions of lives, but economic growth has recently been rapid and population growth is not wholly out of control.

Drawing on some not very elaborate statistical data, Dasgupta shows that even if constitutional government and the rule of law are not indispensable to economic development—the nineteenth-century liberal's optimistic view—it is clear that they do not retard it. The Indian balance sheet does not look at all bad alongside China's, even if we allow only a small weight to the importance of civil liberties. The real disasters in the developing world have been in sub-Saharan Africa, where civil liberties have been almost nonexistent and where many countries have experienced substantial negative growth in income per head. Reading John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, many students have drawn from his discussion of civil liberties and material well-being the impression that political repression is likely to help economic growth. But it isn't so. Something that Amartya Sen seems to have been the first to notice must give us particular pause. In no country with a modicum of political liberty and a free press has there been a famine such as those that killed millions in Bengal in 1943, and more recently in Ethiopia and Somalia.

Moreover, any assessment of how well people are living must include the freedoms they enjoy and the things their income is spent on. Among "middle-income" societies, Dasgupta points out, the citizens of Costa Rica have rather less income per person than those of Iraq, and only two thirds the income of those of Iran. Happily for them, they spend none of it on an army, while Iraq and Iran have wasted vast amounts of money fighting each other, a folly that Iraq compounded by provoking a war with the United States. Unsurprisingly, life expectancy in Costa Rica is eleven years greater than in Iraq and Iran and infant mortality less than one third as great.

2.

The economics of very poor societies is extremely difficult to understand for a great many reasons. The vast cultural divide between most of the observers and most of the observed raises the obvious question whether the behavior of poor villagers in the third world is governed by norms and values that outsiders may find hard to comprehend. If that is the case, how can they alter it in any reasonable fashion? Dasgupta acknowledges the importance of such considerations. As he observes, the norms that govern local behavior "can be exploitative, or just plain silly." For instance,

> In rural communities in the foothills of the Himalayas in the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, women give birth to their children in cowsheds and remain there for one to two weeks. They aren't permitted to return to their homes any earlier because they are regarded as impure. The [Indian] Centre for Science and Environment ... reports that village folk in those parts believe cowdung and urine to be good disinfectants. They also believe that the mother and child are protected by the cows from evil spirits. Infant and maternal mortality rates are significantly higher on account of this practice, cowsheds being notoriously unhygienic.

One benefit of educating women is that they cease to believe in such practices.

Sometimes what is at issue is the decay of ethical and social standards that once served a useful purpose. One of the sadder instances is the erosion of the self-restraint that once averted "the tragedy of the commons." It is an axiom in economics that a resource that is owned in common, or available for use without a rent reflecting that use, will be over-exploited. The North Atlantic fisheries are a good example. What any one boat does makes no decisive difference to the stocks of fish, so each fisherman feels he has every reason to catch all he can. Restraint only lowers his own catch without preserving total stocks to an appreciable extent. On that basis, you'd expect common land always to be overgrazed; if other people put all the cows they can on the land, I'd better do so too. The interesting fact, however, is not that there is extensive overgrazing in the third world, but that until recently there was little. Partly, this reflected less pressure from population growth than is now the case. But it also reflected the ability of village communities to enforce norms of self-restraint that protected the continued use of common property.

To be concerned with the place of norms and values in economic life raises wider questions than most economists wish to deal with; but these concerns are relevant to the conditions not only of the very poor but of many others as well.

Once Dasgupta concentrates on the lives of the very poorest people, the consequences for economic analysis are intriguing. In advanced societies, there is a clear line between consumption and savings; savings are the result of consumption forgone today for the sake of greater consumption tomorrow. In really poor households, however, consumption is itself a form of investment; when poor people eat

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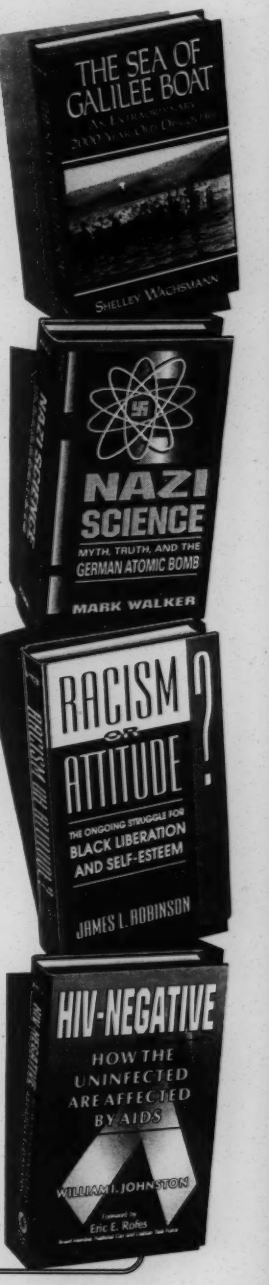

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better, they fare better and produce more. Their health and strength improve.

This is not a small point; the conventional wisdom for forty years after World War II was that rapid industrialization was the way forward and high rates of savings were needed to support it. It was a view that had the imprimatur of the Nobel Prize–winner W. A. Lewis. But it was wrong. Diverting resources away from the consumption of poor people has been a bad bargain; their productivity has been so low that sub-Saharan Africa has invested something like 18 percent of GNP for a growth rate of 1.4 percent. The moral, as Dasgupta puts it, is that "increases in the consumption of basic needs are a form of investment with high returns in poor countries."

This conclusion raises the question of the role of government in the economic development of the poorest societies. In recent years skeptics have argued both that the overseas aid given by the developed world to the underdeveloped world has been wasted and that the governments of underdeveloped countries have at best pursued foolish policies and at worst predatory ones. Others have pointed to the success of Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore as evidence that governments can foster industry, reform agriculture, and create an energetic, ambitious, disciplined work force into the bargain. Professor Dasgupta takes a careful but not an equivocal middle position. He is no enthusiast for wholesale intervention. Governments that try to support particular industries in a way the market will not—trying to "spot winners"—will run unjustified risks. Moreover, they are too likely to throw good money after bad and prop up ailing enterprises long after they should have been allowed to expire.

There are also problems of "moral hazard," which are familiar in developed countries' welfare systems but are particularly acute in countries that cannot afford to waste resources. "Moral hazard" arises wherever a policy gives people an incentive to behave in a way that does economic or social damage. Thus broadly applied food subsidies that lower food prices reduce the incentive to work, while the food may also end up disproportionately in the hands of the better-off. There is evidence that this has happened in Egypt. If food is handed out cheaply, entrepreneurs will be tempted to buy it and resell it. If free public health care is as good in quality as private fee-paid health care, the rich benefit needlessly, and too much is spent on health care for the good it does. People who do not need the benefits being offered will be able to exploit the system. In poor countries, moreover, the state is often seen as an alien force so that exploiting whatever loopholes it leaves is seen as legitimate resistance.

The response cannot be to throw up our hands. The Indian government, as Dasgupta writes, has at various times dealt with the problem of food subsidies by subsidizing only coarse grains; the rich won't eat them, so the poor get all the benefit. If health care is supplied in overcrowded clinics in the slums or in poor villages, the long wait for treatment is enough of a deterrent to those who can afford private medicine. If we worry that the availability of free food will encourage the rural poor to withdraw from the labor market, we can, Dasgupta writes, provide free food only during the periods when there is almost no employment to be had. One of Dasgupta's most original thoughts is that poor countries need "liberalization" but not so much in the sense that they need to be freed from government controls. Instead their people need to acquire a sharper sense of the distinction between private interest and public interest.

Like other recent writers on development, Dasgupta looks to a change in the balance of power inside the poor household to do some good. Prosperity and a fairer deal for women reinforce each other. Much has recently been made of the correlation between increased education for women and the control of fertility. The one thing that appears to be guaranteed to reduce the birthrate in most poor societies is educating women. Dasgupta mentions a qualification to this. Either independently or in conjunction with more education, a woman's ability to work outside the household has a powerful effect on fertility.* Here we can see a virtuous circle in operation. Where a woman can work, the household does not need so many children to keep its members alive; conversely, the cost (in income forgone) of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing is increased.

Photograph © Sean Sprague/Impact Visuals

Madyar Pradesh, India, 1990

In the absence of female employment we can, as Dasgupta often and gloomily emphasizes, see at work a vicious circle. There is, he points out, an interaction between poverty, overpopulation, and environmental decay that appears to have no self-correcting features. Really poor families certainly think of children as a provision against old age and as a form of investment, which is one reason why boys are so valued; but children may be even more important as an immediate source of labor: in rural households in the Himalaya foothills, "children in the age range 10–15 years work one-and-a-half times the number of hours adult males do, their tasks consisting of collecting fuelwood, dung, and fodder, grazing domestic animals, performing household chores, and marketing." Such families are caught in a bind: their productivity is very low so they need all the hands they can muster. If all families have many children, the environment is destroyed, so more children are needed to gather fuel and fodder, to graze animals, and so on. Since fertility only diminishes when human beings are very close to starving to death, the prospect of this downward spiral curing itself is not good.

Dasgupta is a calm critic, but he is something less than friendly to writers like J. L. Simon who have argued that a rising population is good for economic growth even in poor countries. Most poor women want access to birth control; but even if they have that access, they may be overwhelmed by the family's need for labor. Finding ways of educating girls, and employing women, works in favor of controlling fertility since it can relieve the pressure to have more children by altering the economic demands of the family.

Dasgupta has much to say about another matter in which government policy can make a difference—agrarian reform. "Land reform," he shows, has often been a disaster, because just expropriating the holdings of large landowners has rarely increased agricultural output. What is needed is family farms; in poor countries they are more productive than larger farms, and they provide the most direct ways to produce the food that poor villagers need. Equality as such is not a goal; we have seen how easy it is to turn privately owned estates into collective farms and end up with equality of starvation.

Families need to own their farms, or to have the sort of control over them that is equivalent to ownership. Only then can they get credit, and only then will they have an incentive to treat their resources intelligently. It takes governments to establish a legal system that will protect their rights, and it takes intelligent politics to put in place a scheme of reform that provides adequate compensation for those who lose land when family farms are created. All of which brings us back once more to the centrality of civil liberties and open government. Unless there is a free press and mechanisms of political responsibility, policies cannot be evaluated and improved, and private squalor is merely reinforced with public squalor.

There is much in Professor Dasgupta's *Inquiry* that I have not mentioned. His passing remarks on how many recalcitrant facts a theory can decently leave unexplained would provoke a class in the philosophy of science. His discussion of recent ideas about the duties one generation owes to the next would provoke another. I suspect that there are more economists who can appreciate Dasgupta's moral philosophy than philosophers who can appreciate his economics, but both will surely benefit from reading his arguments. In spite of the grimness of much of his subject matter, the book yields the pleasure that only a very clever thinker can give his readers. I wish that Dasgupta would now bend his talents to the politically much needed task of giving the non-specialist reader an idea of why the path of economic development has been so painfully slow for so much of the world, and why there is reason to think we can do better. □

*See his essay "Population, Poverty and the Local Environment" in *Scientific American*, February 1995, pp. 40–45.

Aristocrats

Darryl Pinckney

Daughters:
On Family and Fatherhood
by Gerald Early.
Addison-Wesley, 234 pp., $17.00

Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society
by John Edgar Wideman.
Pantheon, 197 pp., $21.00

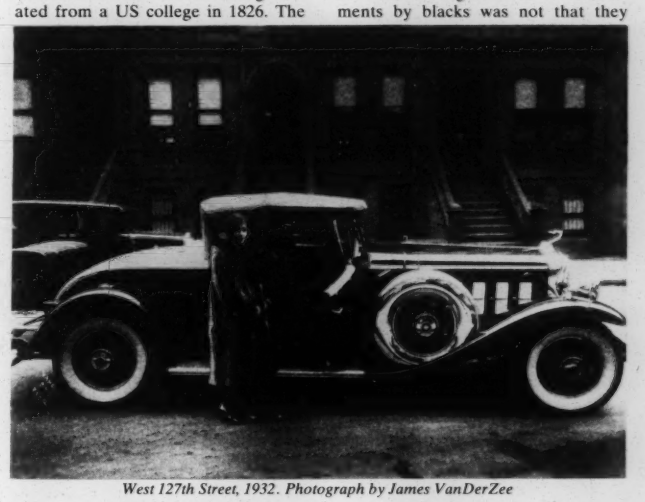
Colored People: A Memoir
by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Knopf, 221 pp., $22.00;
Vintage, 216 pp., $11.00 (paper)

1.

Black America has always felt itself divided into two classes, the muckymucks and the folk. That blacks considered themselves aristocrats because they were descended either from free blacks or from "quality" whites is bizarre to the post–Black Studies generation, because for blacks to have thought of themselves as "top lofty" would seem to have required ignorance of how most free blacks had really lived, as well as a certain amnesia about who the main sexual predators of slaves were. But even when occupation and education became central to determining class, the connection between high status and light skin was not broken completely. For the longest time class was spoken of as a matter of whispering Episcopalians, murmuring Presbyterians, shouting Methodists, and screaming Baptists.

W. E. B. Du Bois, proud of his Huguenot, Dutch, and free African ancestry, was the first to offer a systematic analysis of the social structure of the black community, most extensively in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899).[1] What counted as an upper-class occupation changed from generation to generation. The black caterers said to "rule" Philadelphia high society in the 1840s had disappeared by Du Bois's day. He identified three classes, but, unfortunately, he liked that word "aristocrat." Because of the lower status of blacks in relation to the larger society, what Du Bois called the black aristocracy of professionals, businessmen, and white-collar workers corresponded to what was middle class for whites. He was elevating the newly emerged urban black professional class to the exalted position in the black population that would cause so much resentment later on. Du Bois's description of class also reflected the conceptual bias about human behavior then prevalent among social reformers: thus lower-class blacks, oppressed by their environment, were debauched, while the majority of blacks, the regularly employed, honest, working poor, were sympathetic, teachable, and amenable to copying those above them.

There was no such thing as old or new money, just black folks' money. The demise of Reconstruction had made it hard for blacks to acquire capital or to pass on property to their children. As blacks were driven from all but the most limited spheres of business and political life, the prestige of the professional rose in the black community. It was this class that constituted the Talented Tenth, that "aristocracy of talent" summoned from the mist of class differences to the altar of race leadership. "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," Du Bois declared in an essay in *The Negro Problem* (1903).[2] There was nothing new about his hope that an educated class would act as a vanguard. The relationship between knowledge and freedom had been established before the first black graduated from a US college in 1826. The failed connection between education and advancement was more difficult to explain, as if there were a fault in the social wiring.



West 127th Street, 1932. Photograph by James VanDerZee

Du Bois was criticized by those who believed that agitating for social and political equality had distracted blacks from building solid economic foundations, that this equality was of urgency only to an elite, and that "Negro leadership should have begun at the plow and not in the Senate." Du Bois pointed out that even Booker T. Washington's program of industrial training depended on a faculty educated in the humanities, that Washington's staff included the sons of a congressman and a senator, and they weren't "buying pianos for dirty cabins." Du Bois meant that the cruel fantasy about what was possible for blacks was not in encouraging them to learn Latin, but in Washington's wanting to make them artisans in an industrial economy of closed unions, immigrant labor, and racist assumptions about the abilities of blacks. However, under Jim Crow better-off blacks became removed from other blacks and developed their own institutions,[3] which were then sneered at as sad imitations of the white originals. Often whites refused to tolerate black professionals as competitors; where they could establish themselves, they complained that other blacks would not support them and took their business to whites.[4]

Du Bois was to regret the youthful optimism of his "panacea." He had imagined the Talented Tenth as a transitional leadership, and that its power would lie in its knowledge and ethical character, not in its quest for wealth. He saw the ideal of the Talented Tenth declining into an ideology in which the significance of achievements by blacks was not that they were contributions to their chosen fields, but that these contributions were made by blacks. Also, because the existence of educated blacks was felt to indict a system that granted freedoms to whites who were their social inferiors, not only could a black not be like everybody else, but a Talented Tenther, whose destiny was invested with the mysticism of Gospel and dignified by the authority of social science, was no longer like every other black.[5]

Blacks, like any other group, exert enormous social control upon one another. After World War I, when US society as a whole became a mass culture, blacks began to shed some of the deference that had made middle-class blacks acceptable to the black masses as emissaries to whites and as missionaries to poorer blacks, a deference that had led educated blacks to feel themselves stepchildren in the house of bourgeois culture. The Talented Tenth reached its apotheosis as a cultural force in black life during the Harlem Renaissance, after which its reputation went downhill. The distance of race leaders from poor blacks, the insisted-upon obviousness of the educated black's identity crisis, and the impotence of the black middle class as a segment of the middle class in US society made the Talented Tenth conspicuous objects of criticism.

In 1940 the novelist and essayist J. Saunders Redding, a contemporary of Richard Wright's, traveled by car from the coal fields of West Virginia to the sand hills of Mississippi. Redding appreciated the stories old people told him as the sun fell in their laps, but he was not looking for tall tales. Though he did not share Wright's impatience with folklore, he regarded "legends" as poor compensation for the living conditions he observed along the clay roads. Redding went past the familiar images of blacks in shanties, brutal white sharecroppers, and the old darky guarding the gates of the plantation mansion where black tourists were not allowed, to write one of the truly haunting books about black communities in the South, *No Day of Triumph* (1942). Part autobiography, part oral history, part travelogue, *No Day of Triumph* is such an unusual portrait of the South because it is about black professionals and the descendants of black landowners as Redding found them in Roosevelt's second term, what is nowadays called the old black middle class. In every hamlet, railroad junction, and river town Redding managed to meet the lone black doctor, the black factory owner, the lawyer, the schoolteachers, the ministers, the college president.

Redding's "planless seeking" in the South uncovered family histories of black businessmen cheating black farmers, daughters stealing from mothers, in-laws paying the white sheriff to do away with the beneficiary of a will. One prosperous all-black community was divided by the color line that was introduced with the arrival of the town's first "high-yellow bride." Redding found black people who did not want to be leaders, though their education made the black community look to them as such, and black people who were giving up and moving across the Ohio River to pass for white. An AB degree in this culture of "spiritual poison" meant to the rest and sometimes even to themselves "also black" or "arse backwards." The novel, *As We See It* (1910), explained that by "We," "I mean the educated Negroes, those of cultured families of the third and fourth generations, those Negroes who see things as other men of their mental caliber see them, who feel the sting of race prejudice most keenly, and at whom the damnable laws of the South are aimed.... In this story we picture that class of Negroes who are doing something, whose lives, homes and successes are the same as those of other men, and who, starting from nothing, have in fifty years accumulated in the aggregate more than two hundred and fifty million dollars worth of property. These people compose that class of American citizens whom the calamity howlers are careful to keep in the background."

[1] See also "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia," in *W. E. B. DuBois: A Reader*, edited by David Levering Lewis (Holt, 1995).

[2] See also "Careers Open to College-Bred Negroes" in *W. E. B. Du Bois: Writings*, edited by Nathan Huggins (Library of America, 1986).

[3] See also *American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth*, by Alfred A. Moss, Jr. (Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

[4] Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro Professional Man and the Community* (Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1934).

[5] To respond to what they considered libels from whites about the Negro, black apologists before World War I preferred to concentrate on what was called the better class of the race. Robert L. Waring, in a foreword to his

exceptions to this neurosis about class and race were unpretentious folk who had successfully resisted attempts by white people to displace them from large landholdings and professionals with no concern for their own physical safety or material comfort.

Born in 1907 in Wilmington, Delaware, a graduate of Brown University, Redding was himself a product of the old black middle class. His father was in the postal service and worked at extra jobs as a member of the local waiters' association, which, back then, placed Redding's family on the rising slopes. "We lived in a sort of neutral ground between the last orderly outposts of the well-to-do and the teeming camp of the hard-faced poor." His mother went into a rage when, during World War I, black migrants began to pour in from the South and whites fled the neighborhood. He recalls with shame the respect given his light-skinned, well-spoken maternal grandmother and the embarrassment they felt for his dark-skinned, countrified paternal grandmother, who hated white people.

Though Redding doesn't treat the black middle class of cities like Atlanta in his book, he makes it clear that he is relieved to have fled that insular world.[6] He despised his colleagues in the English department at Morehouse College for what he saw as their self-importance about having Ph.D.s from, say, Columbia. A white hitchhiker whom Redding picked up turned out to be a Communist, union organizer, and weary veteran of the Spanish Civil War, who told him, "I'd give anything to be an American, like you. A damn middle-class American nigger. Can you imagine it?" Richard Wright declared in his introduction to *No Day of Triumph* that Redding's book would "rock the Negro middle class back on its heels," and he applauded Redding as "the first middle-class Negro to break with the ideology of the 'Talented Tenth.'"

Redding was not the first. In 1924 Langston Hughes, then a Columbia dropout just back from bumming around Europe, went to live in Washington, DC, with cousins who were descended from Congressman John Mercer Langston. Hughes remembers in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), trying to get a "dignified" job as a page boy in the Library of Congress, which seemed "to require a tremendous list of qualifications and influential connections." He washed dishes instead. Theaters would not sell a ticket to Hughes; he couldn't buy a cup of coffee anywhere within sight of the Capitol, and new films did not play in black movie houses. Washington, DC, was a Southern city.

> I asked some of the leading Washington Negroes about this, and they loftily said that they had their own society and their own culture—so I looked around to see what that was like.
>
> To me it did not seem good, for the "better class" Washington colored people, as they called themselves, drew rigid class and color lines within the race against Negroes who worked with their hands, or who were dark in complexion and had no degrees from colleges. These upper class colored people consisted largely of government workers, professors and teachers, doctors, lawyers, and resident politicians. They were on the whole as unbearable and snobbish a group of people as I have ever come in contact with anywhere.... They had all the manners and airs of reactionary, ill-bred *nouveaux riches*—except that they were not really rich. Just middle class. And many of them had less fortunate brothers or cousins working as red-caps and porters—so near was their standing to that of the poorest Negro.[7]

There was a remnant of 1930s radicalism in Redding's exposé of the venality of the black middle class and in Wright's dismissiveness of Talented Tenth leadership. The Depression was devastating for middle-class blacks, not just for poor blacks. In his autobiography, *Black Bolshevik* (1978), Harry Haywood recalls paying a visit to an Atlanta lawyer, educated at Amherst and Harvard, the son of a self-made businessman with a five-car garage, who, after his father had lost his newspaper and office buildings, rebelled against the narrow practice to which segregation confined him by taking on the defense of the activist Angelo Herndon. The Communist Party and the NAACP clashed bitterly during the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s, and Talented Tenth leadership never fully recovered from the Party's charge that it was unable to respond to, let alone know, the will of the black majority.

Zora Neale Hurston, who seldom missed a chance to poke fun at "Negrotarians," relates in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), an incident that made her realize "how theories go by the board." When she was a student at Howard University in Washington, DC, in 1918, she worked as a manicurist in a black-owned barbershop that catered to white congressmen and cabinet members. One day "a Negro" demanded a haircut and shave, citing his constitutional rights. The black barbers and the white customers rushed to throw him out, which Hurston approved of, because, although in doing so she was supporting Jim Crow, the Negro was threatening her livelihood. She does not say who represented the black middle class in her mind that day, the well-spoken Negro testing perhaps on impulse his constitutional rights or the barber, the owner of a small business. She goes on to say that people made careers of being race men or race women, but these race leaders were crying over a race solidarity that did not exist because it did not extend across class lines.

When Hurston came up North to attend Barnard College she noticed that well-mannered, well-dressed blacks were embarrassed by other blacks "talking loud" in public. Conscious of "white standards of living," the educated Negroes feared that the loud blacks were tearing down the image of blacks. The "humble Negro," antagonistic to the "Big Nigger," "does not resent a white man looking down on him. But he resents any lines between himself and the wealthy and educated of his own race." The mucky-mucks in Hurston's analysis complained that the common element didn't know how to behave and that whites thought all blacks were the same. The folk countered that the better element were just trying to act white and that all blacks were indeed the same when it came to racism.

As it turns out, the group that most irritated Hurston were the people in "neither the top nor the bottom of Negrodom" who nevertheless considered themselves "the better-thinking Negro." Lacking, as Hurston saw it, the "happy carelessness of the group beneath them and the understanding of the top-flight Negro above them," they wanted "nothing to do with anything frankly Negroid" and fled from "Negrodom." They paced in a cage that wasn't there and took comfort in a "fur coat peerage." One can infer from her friendships with James Weldon Johnson and Walter White whom she praised Hughes as a "cultural ambassador," which, as Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has pointed out, recalls the caustic language of Wright's 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which he asserted that works of literature by blacks in the past had been like "prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America," that they represented "the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white American for justice" and were rarely addressed to the Negro himself.

Zora Neale Hurston

OTHER BOOKS MENTIONED IN THIS ESSAY

The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study
by W. E. B. Du Bois.
Kraus, 531 pp., $31.00

No Day of Triumph
by J. Saunders Redding.
Harper and Brothers
(out of print)

The Big Sea
by Langston Hughes.
Hill & Wang, 335 pp., $12.95 (paper)

Dust Tracks on a Road
by Zora Neale Hurston,
in **Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writing**
Library of America,
1,001 pp., $35.00

The Negro Family: A Study of Family Origins Before the Civil War
by E. Franklin Frazier.
Ayer, 372 pp., $10.00

Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States
by E. Franklin Frazier.
Macmillan, 222 pp., $6.95 (paper)

Coming Up Down Home: A Memoir of a Southern Childhood
by Cecil Brown.
Ecco Press, 222 pp., $22.95

Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Woman's Journey Home
by Gloria Wade-Gayles.
Beacon, 256 pp., $20.00

[6]Redding wrote about his Atlanta years in a later book, *On Being Negro in America* (1951).

[7]It's odd that Wright overlooked Hughes's mockery of the Talented Tenth. When Redding's book was published, Hughes was just beginning to face the public attacks that would persuade him to play down his earlier involvement with the Communist Party. Perhaps Wright wanted to make Redding's book more dramatic by presenting it as being the only one of its kind to be critical of middle-class blacks. Though Hughes's experiences in Washington made for only a short chapter of *The Big Sea*, his autobiography would have been fresh in Wright's mind because Wright reviewed it. But *Native Son* was published at the same time as *The Big Sea* and completely overshadowed it. Hughes was acidly diplomatic in his public remarks about Wright's best seller. Wright in turn

had in mind as "top flight," men pale enough to pass for white who chose not to, a category, perhaps, that would not offend her old friends in the black intelligentsia. But Hurston's sympathies were with the folk, who, she said, were willing to die for one another. If Redding and Wright criticized middle-class blacks on political grounds, then Hurston attacked the same people for turning their backs on what she considered their cultural heritage.

Hurston could overlook the meaning of the class distinctions she herself drew. In an article written in 1943, "The 'Pet Negro' System," reprinted in the excellent Library of America edition of her work, she argues that the North had no interest in the particular Negro but talked of justice for the whole, whereas the South had no interest in the black masses but was very concerned about the individual black. A white person down South would permit his or her Pet Negro privileges forbidden to the black masses. The Pet Negro went to "Mr. Big" to negotiate for the community, and Hurston concedes that such an informal system of social redress strained the integrity of the Pet Negro and aroused jealousy in the black community, but it could free the black professional from competition with whites and also gratified his personal vanity. "The South makes a sharp distinction between the upper-class and the lower-class Negro." The existence of well-off blacks in the South was a secret up North because race crusaders wanted to keep the "worst aspects" of black life always before the public. "Why drag in the many Negroes of opulence and education?"

This is a variation on the Good Negro/Bad Negro theme, which has never depended on class. In the literature from which D.W. Griffith took his film images—Thomas Dixon's novels *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), for instance—the educated Negro is the villain, the black who forgets his place. One can't tell from Hurston's tone how serious she is. Richard Wright was critical of what he called Hurston's minstrel images of cooperation and hat holding, while Hurston saw it as her mission to dissent from the black-life-as-pathology message of intellectuals like Wright. Eventually, her belief in the healing powers of the all-black environment became sentimental. She opposed school desegregation in 1954, and this and other idiosyncratic pronouncements helped to bury her reputation before her death in 1960, but she has been resurrected as the queen of folk attitude, which includes eye-rolling behind the backs of mucky-mucks who appear to be giving themselves airs.

2.

The modern Civil Rights era that we think of as having begun in the 1950s with the Montgomery bus boycott was in many important respects already underway during World War II, with James Farmer's first sit-ins and A. Philip Randolph's threat to lead a civil rights march on Washington. Lena Horne, with her high cheekbones and upper-class family in Brooklyn and Atlanta, endeared herself to black troops by making visits to segregated training camps that were more like prisons. But from the Southern campaigns of the 1950s came the most damaging image of obstructionist conservatism in the black middle class: that of the minister either afraid or unwilling to support Martin Luther King, Jr. The outcome of King's mass movement was far from certain, and resentment of the black middle class for being cut off from the masses and therefore from reality boiled over in E. Franklin Frazier's ferocious polemic, *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957).

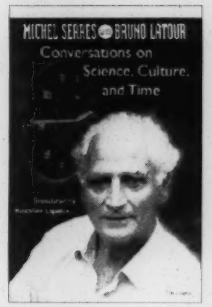
Frazier had included chapters on the social traditions of the "old families" and the urban middle class, and how they related to stability in *The Negro Family in the United States*, originally published in 1939 and revised in 1948 to take advantage of new statistics. Frazier's purpose in this influential study was to demonstrate that the social disorganization of blacks was caused by the migration to northern cities, which was as traumatic to family relations as slavery and Emancipation had been. The privileged status of the old families, their moral earnestness about educational advantages, social graces, and reluctance to marry outside their class, became irrelevant with the new mobility of the black. Urbanization also meant regional differences. In the South, clergymen made up the majority of the black professional class but were a minority in the same class in Boston or New York.

The middle-class blacks interested Frazier as successful competitors in the new environment of the city. In *The Negro Family* Frazier was reserving judgment on them, saying that the changes in the structure of black life brought about by urbanization had been rapid, and had not had time to solidify. But in *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier delivers his verdict. Gone is the detached, almost clinical distance of the earlier work. He is furious with disappointment, disgusted by what he sees as the frivolity and shallowness of the black middle class, the preoccupation with display and exclusivity, the snobbery, pretentiousness, and philistinism.[8]

Black Bourgeoisie was the kind of book whose message was clearest in its damning chapter headings and the recurrence of phrases like "inferiority complex," or "frustrated and insecure." A closer examination shows how much Frazier's animus was fed by his new research, which concentrated on readings of *Ebony* and *Jet*, glossy magazines notorious for their fatuity. It could be argued that the black professionals and their wives who wanted to be written about in *Ebony* were representative of only one segment of the black middle class in the 1950s, but the black press, in Frazier's view, by exaggerating that segment's economic and cultural achievements, bore the responsibility for creating the

[8]He seems to have caught his tone of exasperation from Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), in which Woodson declares that "the large majority of the Negroes who have put on the finishing touches of our best colleges are all but worthless in the development of their people." Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake surveyed the same social environment of black clubs, neighborhoods, and professional credentials in Chicago, yet they were milder in their conclusions.

MICHEL SERRES



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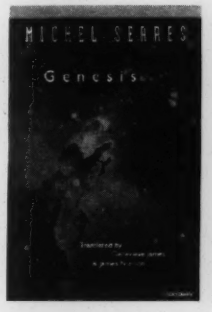

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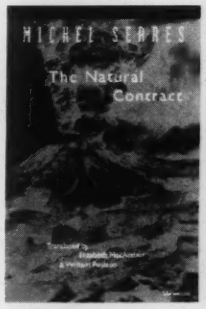

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"make-believe" into which the black middle class escaped. In his review of *Black Bourgeoisie*, Du Bois said that he shared Frazier's distaste for *Ebony*, but he had to admit that his granddaughter's coming-out party was lovely.

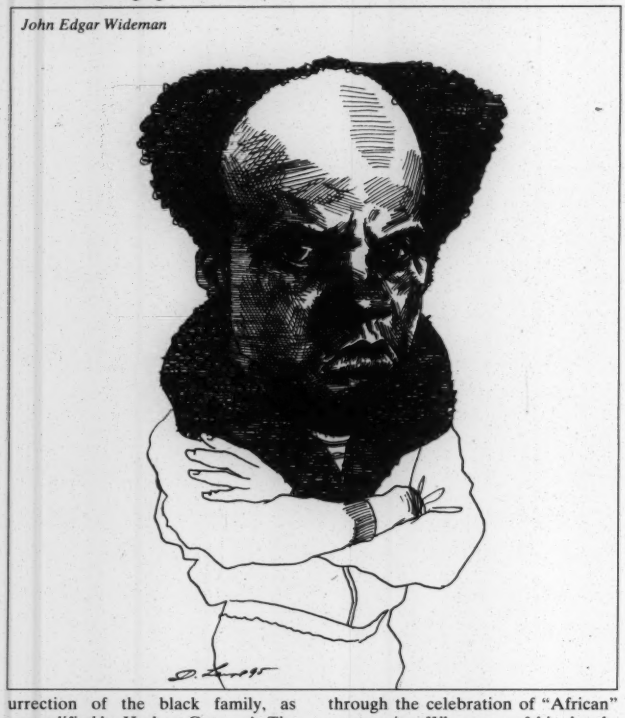
No other work had such an impact on how the black middle class was perceived. The class that in Du Bois's youth had been capable of amazing the black masses as the eloquent voice of the struggle for equality became symbolic of self-loathing and race treachery, of political timidity and cultural sham. Because the black middle class for the most part favored integration, in the 1960s black nationalists regarded it as an enemy. Malcolm X once boasted that he made middle-class blacks uncomfortable because he confronted them with their own negative feelings about whites.

For black youth in the 1960s, disowning one's middle-class upbringing became a test. The need to overcome middle-class status was reflected in the titles of autobiographies such as Leslie Alexander Lacy's *The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro* (1970). Lacy grew up in an unnamed small Southern community, in what he calls Town Two, the black middle-class preserve between Town One, the white neighborhood, and Town Three, where most blacks lived. Lacy began to doubt his social reality when his father, a doctor, was forced to move his family to another city because whites thought him too prosperous. After attending Brown University, Lacy went to Ghana where he witnessed the 1966 coup that overthrew Nkrumah. In the sequel, *Native Daughter* (1974), Lacy is working as a teacher of unwed mothers in Bedford-Stuyvesant. One could say that instead of repudiating his class Lacy was following its tradition of service, but at that time a middle-class background was seen as an inheritance of false consciousness that had to be renounced before true black feeling could be embraced. In the days of militant books such as Donald Reeves's *Notes of a Processed Brother* (1971), Gail Lumet Buckley's fascinating family history, *The Hornes* (1986), would have been particularly suspect, because the story of the well-born was not thought to serve the interests of black history.

The first research by blacks into black identity, by Kenneth B. and Mamie Clark in the 1950s, was modeled after Alfred Adler's inquiries into Jewish self-hatred. But in the years after their studies were published, other black psychologists moved away from the notion that because of the pathology of black life blacks automatically assigned to whiteness the value of "good" and to blackness the value of "bad." What one clinical psychologist[9] has called the "emergence of nigrescence" or the "psychic conversion from a Negro to black identity" is like the psychological metamorphosis Fanon urges in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There has been nothing as persuasive as Fanon's interpretation of black identity as a process of ego development, the decolonization of the mind. This model of internal liberation, of the inner voyage from denial to acceptance of the self, is projected back into black history, even into how blacks refer to themselves. In class terms this means the triumph of the folk because authentic black culture is thought to reside with them.

In the late 1970s, when mass movement politics appeared to be exhausted, the revival of interest in the folk roots of black culture was part of the rejection of the view of black life as traumatic—"pathologies perpetuated through cumulative ugliness," "the affliction of inferior status," "the alienation from normal society," to use some of Kenneth B. Clark's Sixties' phrases. The most important feature of the changing view was the resurrection of the black family, as exemplified by Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1976), which disputed the Moynihan Report's suggestion that the historical cause for the weaknesses of the black family was the absence of black fathers, and argued that black families in the past were stable and "double-headed." The looseness with fact in *Roots* (1976) fit the psychological need perfectly. It presented the slave experience not only as a family saga but as the emotional equivalent of the landing at Plymouth Rock or the trek westward in covered wagons. The elevation of the fortified, striving family to a place of importance in black history rehabilitated the image of the South, the Old Country, as James Baldwin called it, and the shift in emphasis from political agitation to the cultural heritage of survival and family strength meant the release of middle-class blacks from the penance of racial guilt. One's children have a way of sanitizing one's materialism.

John Edgar Wideman



3.

Gerald Early, an essayist and editor of Countee Cullen's collected writings, is director of African-American Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. In *Daughters*, his account of what it means to him to be a black man rearing with his wife two daughters in middle-class America, Early muses that his house is "filled to the rafters with books by and about black people," that his children are "awash in exposure to African American culture," and yet their knowing who Countee Cullen and Thelonious Monk were has "little emotional impact on them—perhaps because there is little emotional impact of any of this knowledge on me." Though Early consciously tries to instill in his daughters an appreciation of the Blues, he is not, he says, "Afrocentric." African-American culture is not "demonstrated" at home through the celebration of "African" ceremonies. When one of his daughters tells him that she doesn't need a Malcolm X T-shirt to let everybody know she's not ashamed of being black, Early is relieved.

However, Early confesses that he worries that his children, who attend a predominantly white school and live in an almost all-white neighborhood, have no black friends. He and his wife are ambivalent about the possibility of interracial dating in their daughters' futures. "There is something oddly daunting about this black, middle-class life," Early confides. "At cocktail parties, one is never sure if one's white neighbors are smiling at you with the self-satisfaction of knowing, with you before them as living and incontrovertible proof, that the American Dream works for everyone, or with the faint contempt that their accomplishments cannot be much," if all it took for blacks to get there was ten or twenty years of affirmative action—as if it were solely affirmative action that got blacks there. Early seems to have awakened in a suburb where middle-class whites are like the mariners fearful for the ship. The crew is drawing lots and giving the Jonahs weird looks.

Early made a habit of taking his daughters with him when he went shopping, because a black man out with children was a family man, not a threat. On one occasion in 1991, when he was waiting for his family at a mall in Frontenac, a St. Louis suburb, he was questioned by a police officer, because a jewelry shop had reported a suspicious-looking man lurking about. The Frontenac authorities refused to make an apology, and the incident escalated into a public scandal. Early and his wife received hate mail and crank calls, but he was surprised by the degree of sympathy from whites. The support from blacks made him uneasy, because he could not feel the racial solidarity the scandal seemed to demand of him, and being seen as a symbol of racial justice made him think of himself as a hypocrite. And some blacks reminded him that he could take such a public stand because he was not risking his job. But he was most troubled by the reluctance of his daughters to discuss what had happened to him.

Early is aware that his two daughters, born in 1979 and 1981, are growing up in circumstances very different from those of his own childhood. They are middle class whereas he feels that he will always be poor no matter how much money he makes, that he will die in the class into which he was born. He also will be always from another time, another place. He and his two siblings grew up in an Italian working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia in the 1950s. His mother was left a widow when his father died young. Early had jobs ever since, beginning with a newspaper route at age nine. He took his daughters to Philadelphia only once. Ages five and seven at the time, they were "shocked" that he was related to poor and boisterous people. His "black" life frightened them, but he admits that perhaps their awkwardness during the visit reflected his own.

Early notes that when he was a child his mother never told him any stories about her childhood. She had, Early recalls, "a great air of seriousness" and the immediate concerns of keeping the family together perhaps made her regard "memory recitation" as sentimental. Early came to understand that when his mother told him that he had to be a man and to learn to take care of himself, when she urged him to rely on his own resources, it was the voice of the black parent who couldn't pass on to her child a good life. He conceives of sharing his childhood with his own children as a way of comforting them. "Indeed, stories of my childhood became, for them and for me, the very thread of continuity and love, of identification and convergence." Comparing his own recollections to what his daughters tell him they're feeling becomes a sort of emotional glue and a method of instruction.

Though his prose trembles, one could say, with love and anxiety, his subjects are at the mercy of his purpose. Early includes poems he has written for his children and "verbatim" entries from their diaries, which bring his tone close to one of those helpful guides about the gift of parenthood. He states clearly that he has the express permission of his daughters to write openly about them, but the child who does not object to Daddy writing about her learning disabilities

[9]William E. Cross, Jr., *Shades of Black: Diversity in African-American Identity* (Temple University Press, 1991).

or her first menstruation may discover a different feeling about privacy as an adult. Early accepts the responsibility and, with his wife lending a patient ear. he moves from one self-reproach to another, asking himself whether it is approval he wants from his children or power over them.

Early's program of sharing experience is also a form of giving his daughters something he didn't have as a child. Toward the end he describes what it is like for him, he who grew up in a house of women and who is uncomfortable around men, to be called "Daddy," to be the father he never had when a child himself. As for the wish to pass on stories, this is at the heart of the US experience, the America where people have come from someplace else, where they move house, see their economic status change, where technology erases a childhood landscape. Continuity is achieved through narrative rather than place.

Telling stories means more to the teller at the time than it does to the told, but stories wait to be discovered after the teller is dead. John Edgar Wideman has a curatorial relationship to his stories of black life and family feeling. Born in 1941, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Wideman has published nine novels, two volumes of short stories, and a memoir, all eclectic in style and highly praised. Since the early 1980s when the novels in the Homewood trilogy appeared, his fiction has concentrated on his native Pittsburgh and his family history. One book refers to another as the family story is rearranged, retold, reinvented. "Consider all these stories as letters from home." His memoir *Brothers and Keepers* (1984) reads like a concordance to his fiction about the scenery and personalities of Homewood, the neighborhood where he grew up. He honors his debt to this resource material, as if the stories hadn't come from him so much as they had passed to or through him. His work is thus an act of preservation, which is itself a cultural affirmation, given Wideman's belief, as elaborated in his autobiographical essay *Fatheralong*, that there is a conspiracy to prevent the stories of black men from being transmitted from generation to generation.

Fatheralong is about Wideman's search for his father's stories, about his attempt to connect with him because time may be running out for him to do so. "The past, present, future flatten into one chance, one chance and then everything's gone." "Fatheralong" was what Wideman heard as a child when his church sang "Farther along we'll know more about You." For Wideman the hymn referred to God, and also to his father's "doubleness, his two-personedness," his presence in the house as the man who ruled and yet lived somewhere else. Wideman says that he isn't recollecting his father so much as he is re-experiencing the domestic power and privilege he associated with him. He begins in Homewood, but as if to support the argument that history isn't "a fixed, chronological, linear outline," is instead "the activity over time of all the minds comprising it," he approaches the figure of his father and the subject of manhood as occasions for far-flung ruminations. The complex structure of *Fatheralong* and its rhetorical flights, the attitude toward down-home riff as lyricism, resemble the use of the Blues voice to convey folk irony in Albert Murray's intellectual history and memoir, *South to a Very Old Place* (1971).

Wideman's prose has always asked to be read carefully, but the digressive narrative strategy here perhaps disguises whatever unease there could be about what he chooses to disclose. Writers are not alone when they are tempted by the autobiographical voice. Unless they make the tough choices that come easily only to the ingrate, unless they are governed by such a compulsion to write that they don't feel compromised, their foreheads will be brushed by the web of accountability. This constraint is, of course, not peculiar to black writers: Isherwood was careful when his mother was alive; J. R. Ackerley and T. R. Worsley wrote, like Gosse, as survivors of the father. Though no writer is obliged to be confessional, perhaps black writers are more inhibited because of the strain of their historic mission, the unspoken stricture against airing dirty laundry, the admonition that they must not go off into the white world and embarrass where they came from, the reluctance to demean even inadvertently the experience of those on whose shoulders they stand, and the anxiety that too much honesty will only gratify the enemy.

Therefore a deep truth is sometimes compensation for what cannot be expressed more directly. If a writer's first audience is composed of people who understand his or her idiom, then that audience might include the family, people who could be waiting at the airport with not only greetings but also a few questions. This is one of the effects of black culture having become increasingly literary. Richard Wright didn't worry about hurt feelings back home, but not until James Baldwin wrote *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), when the secret had lost some of its jagged edges, did he reveal in print through an elegant aside that he was illegitimate, that his father was really his stepfather. Sometimes the teller is more afraid than the told of the tale's surprises.

And so Wideman, who clearly cherishes his mother, must insert as unobtrusively as possible among a list of facts about his father, such as that he shadowboxed, rooted for the Yankees, once defended himself with a knife, or worked as a waiter and a welder, the information that his father had another set of children, even though this may help to account for the tension Wideman remembers about growing up and why his father is the stranger at his mother's door when he comes to drive Wideman to the airport. He is the estranged man "growing old, alone and poor," who has to be fitted into a schedule whenever Wideman goes back to Pittsburgh. Similarly, Wideman surrounds with the gauze of an intricate understanding the memory of the humiliation he felt as a provocative adolescent when his father smacked him. Wideman contends that when Wright repudiated his father in *Black Boy*, he came "perilously close to repudiating all people of color."

Wideman describes a trip he took

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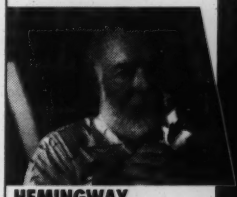

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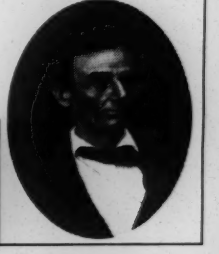

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with his father to "do a roots thing." They went looking for graves, relatives, documents. Because he never wanted to visit the Old Country when he was a boy, when the Emmett Till story was still current, Wideman is more than ready to make up for it in his grandfather's birthplace in South Carolina by learning to "relax into the thickness that holds all the stories." Wideman convinces himself that his skin recalls sensations he can't name. He believes a message is spoken by the land, by the pine forests and meadows. He hopes that either his mind or Mind can unlock the correspondences. Memory isn't archival, "it is a seeking of vital harmony, an evocation of a truer, more complete, saturated present tense." He sounds like someone willing himself into a hypnotic state of mental abdication and retreats into the romanticism of the storyteller's valor.

> The stories must be told. Ideas of manhood, true and transforming, grow out of private, personal exchanges between fathers and sons. Yet for generations of black men in America this privacy, this privilege has been systematically breached in a most shameful and public way. Not only breached, but brutally usurped, mediated by murder, mayhem, misinformation. Generation after generation of black men, deprived of the voices of their fathers, are for all intents and purposes born semi-orphans.

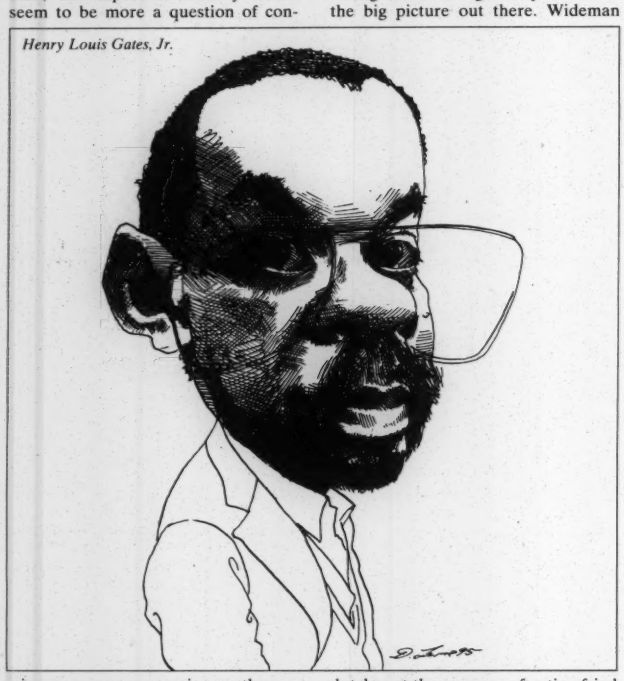
We are told every day that men suffer from trying to live up to notions of closed-mouthed masculinity, that black men have to take responsibility for their families, that racism is to blame for their absences, their silences, and that black sons live mostly in matriarchal households. Instead of recapitulating the charges that black people have been denied their history and are complicit in remaining cut off from it, he might have been more courageous intellectually to address what the sanctified practice, the cultural balm, of handing down stories has so far done, or not done, for black men. Exhorting fathers to tell sons stories is like advocating love, and never mind that Wideman's central point may not be true, that black men have been telling stories for ages, that some black women have been good fathers. And when have the young ever listened?

The stories themselves that Wideman gives as evidence are anticlimactic because of the expectation he establishes about the redemptive force they must contain. One of the few extended passages in an equivalent of his father's voice concerns his father's memory of being stationed in the South and the menial work that the black soldiers raised to an art through their creative intelligence as laborers. Though Wideman makes a display of being "real" with, and about, his father, he does not put himself on record as having asked tough questions. He remains trapped in his own head, reading his father for clues, explanations, deep truths, one of which is that fathers impart the "brutal message" of one's own mortality. Looking at his father as a middle-aged father himself, Wideman announces that "age brings you to your father." It is in those moments, when Wideman describes where parents end up, as people who have never been old before, whose lives one can't save, and with whom it is too late to break the pattern of avoiding them, that *Fatheralong* is most lucid.

Apart from speaking as a writer, Wideman doesn't say much about his life after he left Pittsburgh for college. Perhaps Homewood conveys a more heroic image of the black man's struggle than middle-class Amherst where he lives. The majority of blacks and whites in the US live as separately as ever, but being black and middle class is in itself no more a contradiction than being black and a king. For Wideman, this aspect of identity would seem to be more a question of consciousness, even conscience, than a cultural conflict. Where "middle class" in the US was once a code for complacent or escapist, the term has come to signify the angry white voter, and not everyone, black or white, wants to be associated with the punitive mood. No doubt working-class Homewood is the formative experience for Wideman and accounts for his strong identification with the people left behind in a passed-over neighborhood. But something else happened to him. It could happen to anyone: personal misfortune that delivers one over to get lost in the US justice system also puts one in touch with the rage and despair of the poor and the powerless. This possibility calls middle-class blacks to a no-man-is-an-island mood. Wideman imagines black fathers looking through the nursery window at their newborn and envisions the "cloud of race" that momentarily covers their joy as they think of their children having to go through the same battles with racism that they did.

> And we ain't talking here about middle-class angst cause no taxis stop for your black ass in Rockefeller Center. Nor existential maundering when you ride the commuter train in from Scarsdale and the only seat white people ain't occupying is the one next to your brown ass. All that's part of the problem, but the bedrock issue raised by the paradigm of race... is whether you can be someone other than a white person in this society and stay healthy, stay alive.

All Stories Are True, Wideman called a collection of short stories, and all his stories serve a solemn purpose. *Fatheralong* seems to have been conceived with some cathartic intent in mind, but one has the feeling that Wideman is turning away from something he can't bear to look at and insisting on something more profound in the big picture out there. Wideman clutches at the memory of eating fried fish with his father, both of them older and mellower, and then seeks cover in abstract speculation, as if his interpretation of what black men in the US are up against could make bearable the blight on consciousness that he cannot bring himself fully to explain. Wideman remembers falling to his knees a few days after hearing that his younger son was missing and that the boy who shared his son's room at summer camp was dead. He feared his son had been kidnapped. "I was a man who most likely had lost his son, and hugging trees and burying his face in dirt and crying for help till breath slunk out of his body wouldn't change a thing." Perhaps this is what Herzen meant when he said that a man reaches a point where he realizes that his life is over, except for its continuation.



Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

4.

Richard Wright was a writer in exile long before he went to France. Any writer looking back on the lost country of youth can be spoken of as a kind of exile, but the fugitive slave or transplanted black meditating on the dangerous woodlands of the South, feeling banished, wronged, not entirely at home in new surroundings, intensely concentrated on and restless about what was left behind, had a perspective that gave to autobiographies by African Americans a marked kinship with the literature of the exile. It was not a literature of the immigrant, not when one remembers that Langston Hughes tried to write for film and was barely able to dream of a journey like the one Anzia Yezierska makes from Hester Street to Hollywood in her autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). Similarly, when Baldwin talks about his father's distrust of library books or when Gerald Early mentions the resentment other black children felt toward him because of his good diction, one recalls that Alfred Kazin's neighbors in Brownsville did not consider themselves betrayed when boys of academic promise began to lose their accents and to speak differently from them. Even when they were envied, assimilation was not just expected of the lucky, it was possible.

However, climbing over into the American Dream was supposedly alienating for blacks, because to do so meant trying to fit a melting-pot norm. Now that blacks are in the middle class in sufficient numbers and writing books about it, now that they are identifying themselves and reassuring themselves by consulting the straw poll of their peers that this literature represents, being like everyone else no longer means being like whites. Yet because the gaze backward is often from the suburbs or from the office overlooking the campus, some members of the new black middle class are nostalgic for the unambiguous all-black neighborhood, for the certitudes of the street corner. The civil rights days recede, become the old times, and the children of the civil rights era embark on homecomings to visit the old places before they vanish.

Writers in the US have been escaping Main Street ever since Sherwood Anderson's autobiography, and will probably continue to run away from Main Street, now called the shopping mall. In his memoir, *Coming Up Down Home* (1993), Cecil Brown is one of the last black writers to describe getting out of the South in order to breathe the air of New York's bohemia. Brown goes back to Bolton, North Carolina, to forgive and to see what remains, Gloria Wade-Gayles returns after higher education in Boston to Memphis and its scenes of struggle in her autobiography, *Pushed Back to Strength* (1993). In *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., goes back to Piedmont, West Virginia, where he was born in 1950, and because West Virginia isn't the South, Gates's Piedmont can be as nourishing as Hurston's all-black hometown, Eatonville, Florida. His memories of growing up during segregation are of a neighborripe, laughter-laden "sepia world."

Chairman of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard, author of three books on black literature, and editor of several scholarly works, Gates, very much at ease with the language of recent critical theory, has concerned himself with what he calls the invention of tradition, the formation of the canon. The availability of many previously forgotten works of black literature is largely owing to his scholarly efforts. As a theorist of black

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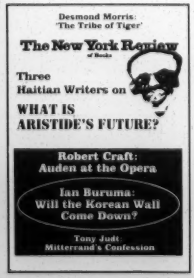

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literature, Gates builds on Hurston's and Ralph Ellison's view that unrelieved suffering is not the only black experience, that what blacks think of themselves is more important than what whites think of them, and that black culture is complex in its humanity. *Colored People* is written in accordance with Gates's theoretical positions, especially those having to do with the centrality of humor, the black vernacular tradition, and what Gates calls the "speakerly text," the voice of blacks in prose.

Gates's voice is unerringly benign. *Colored People* is a gentle tribute to the folks back home and to their perpetual Sunday, "everybody's favorite day, because you could eat yourself silly." It is as though he were strolling after church down to the "people's court" of the bar, the barbershop, the kitchen, the bank steps, greeting everybody by name, flattering them into being characters for him, remembering their oddities, their gossip about infidelities and dust-ups. The speakerly text is filled with names, street names, place names, dance names, hair-cream names, album names, TV show names, pizza shop names. Even the cars have nicknames. Though Gates assures us that the colored people of Piedmont "could wag some hellacious tongues" about drunken cuckolds, who was diddling whom, who had the biggest thing, the worst teeth, the skinniest legs, or cooked the best corn, we have to take his word for it that these stories were funny.

Piedmont's character was bound up with its paper mill. The craft unions did not integrate until 1968. Before then the Italians and Irish worked the good jobs; the blacks worked on the loading dock. "Loading is what Daddy did every working day of his working life. That's what almost every colored grown-up I knew did." His father had a second job as janitor at the telephone company. Blacks lived in two streets, as renters, not owners. "The colored world was not so much a neighborhood as a condition of existence." White people showed up either as bill collectors or voyeurs. They were Mr. Mail Man, Mr. Insurance Man, Mr. Po-lice Man. Blacks couldn't eat in restaurants, sleep in hotels, use certain bathrooms, or try on clothes in stores. "Rage turned inward" took the form of eating and drinking oneself to death in front of the TV. Everybody watched *Amos 'n' Andy* and sports. "What interracial sex was to the seventies, interracial sports was to the fifties." Television, the modern hearth, would become "the ritual arena for the drama of race" when it brought news from "Elsewhere." The civil rights era was a spectator sport for Piedmont. "It was almost like a war being fought overseas." Though Gates's father was scornful of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his mother was firm in her conviction that white people were unclean, "white and colored Piedmont got along pretty well" in those *Leave It to Beaver* years.

Gates's affection for the place he would one day leave but could never leave behind was derived in part from family pride. The shared cultural references, leveling gossip, and common work experience give only the illusion of a classless community. His mother's family was "a very big deal" when he was growing up because, though poor, they were self-sufficient and had been a presence in town a long time, the first colored family to own guns, to hunt on white land, to go to college, to own property. A large clan of born-again Christians, they "classed off" and never went to colored VFW dances. Gates came to know his father's more worldly family at funerals a day trip away in Cumberland, Maryland. He felt "cloaked in the mantle of family" at the cemetery of Gateses going back a hundred years. "Obviously comfortable in the world," given to analyzing things, "metamouthing," "expliciting the implicit," they were "octoroons" way back there and had long ago sent out agents to succeed in the prestigious schools and professions of Elsewhere. Gates, who early on developed an avid interest in collecting information about the Negro, identified more with his father's storytelling family than he did with his mother's non-smoking relations.

A sense of belonging to something special prepared Gates for school, where he was "marked to excel" from the first grade. Piedmont schools integrated in 1955. His older brother had been the pioneer, the one who though cheated of prizes because he was black nevertheless overturned assumptions about how far a colored boy was supposed to go. School remained Piedmont's only "integrated arena." Gates, a popular "love junkie," was never invited to eat in the homes of white friends and gave up on them socially until the late 1960s when, sporting the town's first Afro, he created its first daylight interracial dating scandal. By then he and his classmates were "able to get to know each other across cultures and classes in a way that was unthinkable in our parents' generation."

He experienced the teen-ager's disenchantment, and his beautiful mountain valley suddenly looked like a dying mill town where people cared more about food and basketball than anything else. Gates enrolled in Potomac State College in 1968, because that is where his family always had gone, but quickly transferred to Yale and no longer wanted to be a doctor. He returned to Piedmont often and came to realize that for many of its colored people "integration was experienced as a loss. The warmth and nurturance of the womblike colored world was slowly and inevitably disappearing." His mother once defied a white doctor who told her that the illness that would put Gates in the hospital for six weeks was nothing more than a case of the colored overachiever's nerves.

Colored people meant the spectrum of brown within a single family seated around a long table, from mahogany to cherry wood to almost orange, and it also referred to a feeling, soul—colored schools, colored churches, colored food, colored music, colored funerals, dating colored, marrying colored, divorcing colored, cheating on colored. Across the generational divide colored people "feared that world where so much humiliation had lain in wait" and they "hated that which made them fear," meaning the young, like Gates, who had choices. Some older relations thought he had "too much mouth." "I wanted to learn how to be a free Negro and to be a man," "how to question values and

SECRET AFFAIRS

Franklin Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, and Sumner Welles

IRWIN F. GELLMAN

DECLASSIFIED

THE PRESIDENT: Paralyzed from the waist down. Hides disability from a public never permitted to see him [redacted]

THE SECRETARY OF STATE: Old and frail. His highly contagious and usually fatal disease, [redacted] kept as secret as his wife's Jewish ancestry.

THE UNDER SECRETARY: Married three times but, when drunk, prefers sex with [redacted] boys, and [redacted]

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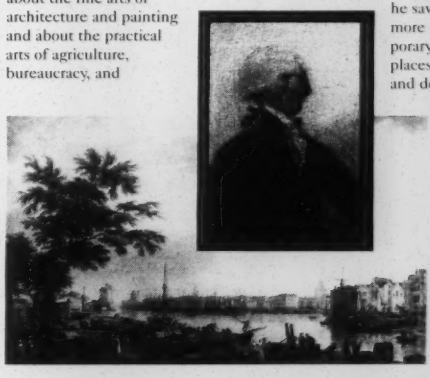

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tradition without being kicked out of the fold, how to value community and order, family and group, yet not have to suppress uncertainties, doubts, ambivalences in order to be accepted." Gates must have left his skepticism in his Elsewhere, because *Colored People* is the homage of the love junkie.

Gates wants to make known to his two daughters the place he came from. They were too young to understand the funerals or to remember his mother, who knew "what people had meant to be in their hearts, not what the world had forced them to become." The preface of *Colored People* is a letter addressed to his daughters. He wants them to feel his pride, to understand why he speaks to colored people whom he does not know on the street, and the satisfaction in a job well done measures the distance from *The Fire Next Time*, which begins with a letter to Baldwin's nephew and namesake.

Baldwin had no illusions about what an education could do for him, he'd encountered too many "college-graduate handymen," and the "social treatment accorded even the most successful Negroes proved that one needed, in order to be free, something more than a bank account." But while looking for the rainbow sign Baldwin remembers church suppers and church outings, rent and "waistline" parties, where pimps, whores, racketeers, and church people, unmolested, away from the race problem, "achieved a freedom with each other that was close to love." In Gates's colored museum the bound-together off-duty appear in soft focus, a picture no doubt gratifying to the folks back home, but in offending no one, perhaps he risks too little. □

(This is the third article in a series.)

Low Lifes

American Tabloid
by James Ellroy.
Knopf, 576 pp., $25.00

Luc Sante

James Ellroy is a crime writer of unusual range and ambition. Actually, to call him a crime writer is perhaps to take hold of the wrong end of the stick; for Ellroy, crime is an underlying reality, not an exceptional circumstance. He views the history of the United States in the twentieth century as something like an extended caper novel—"the story of bad white men," as he has put it[1]—and he clearly intends to be the Balzac of this epic.

He has gradually laid its ground in his eleven previous books. Each of his novels begins with an outrage and ends in a maze. Individual *faits divers* point to serial killings, lead to cover-ups, connect to deals, plots, shifting cabals, double-, triple-, and quadruple-crosses, huge extortion conspiracies, herculean black-bag operations, all of which feed into a pestilential corruption that blankets entire cities and offers no escape. His Los Angeles tetralogy—*The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992)—sweeps across the terrain of that city between 1946 and 1958, assembling a genealogy of sadism and greed that runs through the entire society, its cast a human bestiary that excludes only squares.

His newest novel, *American Tabloid*, picks up the story in Los Angeles in 1958, but goes nationwide within pages. Brief appearances by Howard Hughes, Jimmy Hoffa, and J. Edgar Hoover and evocations of the Cuban revolution and the McClellan Committee outline the book's trajectory: we are entering the swamp of correspondences that will lead up to the Kennedy assassination. To which one's response may be: Not again! The speculative industry devoted to the JFK assassination, frantic in the 1970s, dormant through much of the 1980s, has reawakened of late. King-size, putatively conclusive themes have marched through publishers' catalogs in recent seasons, while the underground of speck analyses and wild schemes has gotten a new life on the Internet. (And Norman Mailer is weighing in with *Oswald's Tale*. See page 52.) Much of this revival of interest can be attributed to the combined effect of Don DeLillo's novel *Libra* (1988) and Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991), of which the latter in particular generated an entire spin-off industry of rebuttals and defenses. But while these two works overlap in their concerns and advance similarly conspiratorial explanations, their methods, approaches, and conclusions could hardly be more different.

Stone's movie, with its dizzying cavalcade of quick cuts and mismatched film stocks, all but turns the story into science fiction. Our hero is New Orleans DA Jim Garrison, reconfigured as some kind of Frank Capra cartoon of the honest dullard; nearly everybody else is a tentacled monster. But Lee Harvey Oswald, Jack Ruby, and the Crescent City illuminati led by Clay Shaw turn out to be expendable stooges deployed by malign forces within the military and CIA who want to knock off Kennedy in part because of his alleged intention to withdraw from Vietnam—this is a well-known fixation of Stone's. DeLillo's book, on the other hand, concentrates on Oswald and penetrates his soul, finding a mire of colliding purposes. The attendant population of spooks and mobsters is revealed as equally human and equally confused and the assassination happens at the point of intersection of various crude plots. *Libra* is a sustained interrogation of how history happens. His answer seems to be: through muddle and chance.

However large their differences, the presence on the scene of two such ambitious treatments of one topic would, you might think, discourage any other attempts for at least a decade or so. In Ellroy's case, however, such logic does not carry much weight. The period just happens to be next in his chronological schema. And anyway, his is not the same old song: the name Lee Harvey Oswald, for example, does not appear within it, and the rumor of the JFK–Marilyn Monroe liaison is depicted as a deliberate FBI fabrication. Popular preoccupations aside, the subject does seem to be a natural for Ellroy. The swarming lowlife, the spectral highlife, and multiple crosses, the shotgun alliances, the compulsions and hidden vices and dubious forms of entertainment—all the primary constituents of his earlier novels can be found in abundance on the real-life fringes of the Kennedy drama, which has become, however you look at it, one of the keystones in the history of bad white men in America. You do not have to be a conspiracy theorist to acknowledge the astonishing pileup of undesirables at every juncture of the story: the Mafiosi, spies, rogue cops, Cuban exile fanatics, right-wing maniacs, stool pigeons, police groupies, drug dealers, second-rate burglars, voyeurs, Ku Kluxers, labor thugs, and miscellaneous riffraff—all are part of the record.

The Kennedy assassination is a mystery with just too many suspects. Were it the subject of a novel hatched in an earlier era, Occam's razor would dictate the simplest solution. Lord Peter Wimsey would undoubtedly dredge up an isolated weirdo with a sliver of opportunity, and the thousand intertwining plots would be written off as red herrings. Nowadays, whatever the truth of the matter may be (and we'll probably never know), the simplest solution is no longer emotionally satisfying. Everything we know about the world militates against it. The concepts of indeterminacy and chaos have filtered down to us from the higher sciences to confirm our nagging suspicions. We no longer believe that World War I was started by Gavrilo Princip, or that the United States selflessly liberated Cuba from the Spanish yoke, or for that matter that John Kennedy was a philosopher-king cut down before he could finish reforming the nation. Complexity and contradiction rule, and few novelists are as much at home with this principle as Ellroy.

Accordingly, *American Tabloid* is virtually impossible to summarize. A profile of Ellroy published a few years ago[2] mentioned his plot outlines: *The Black Dahlia*'s ran to 142 pages (the book itself is 358 pages long in paperback) and that of *L.A. Confidential* to 211 (the paperback has 496). At the time, he had just finished the outline for *Tabloid*; it came to 345 pages, while the book itself runs a mere 576. This is reminiscent of Borges's famous map which is the same size as the country it describes. Actually, once one has read the book it may be difficult to imagine what he could have added to flesh out the skeleton, since just about everything is plot. No space is squandered on scene-setting or atmosphere, and adjectives and adverbs are kept to a strict minimum. The pitch is headlong.

There are three main characters: Pete Bondurant, who at the beginning is a factotum for Howard Hughes and a free-lance extortionist on the side; Kemper Boyd, an FBI agent recruited by Hoover to infiltrate the Kennedy brothers' McClellan Committee on labor rackets; and Ward Littell, also of the FBI but distrusted by the director and consigned to monitoring the activities of pathetically ineffectual old Communists in Chicago. Boyd and Littell are old friends, and both are somewhat acquainted in a mostly unfriendly way with Bondurant. By the

[1]In "Doctor Noir," by Martin Kihn, *New York*, August 24, 1992.

[2]Martin Kihn, "Doctor Noir," p. 116.

time the book ends, the three will have allied with and against each other in every possible combination.

Jimmy Hoffa, Sam Giancana, Santo Traficante, Carlos Marcello, and John and Robert Kennedy enter the book as major characters, as do a passel of Cuban exiles, Klansmen, and variegated fascists (intersections with historical personages are, for obvious reasons, restricted to the safely dead). Also threading through the plot are Lenny Sands, a comedian who works Teamster conventions and the like, specializing in squirm-inducing fag jokes, but who is secretly himself a tortured homosexual, and Laura Hughes, a banished illegitimate daughter of Joseph Kennedy, Sr., and Gloria Swanson. Women in general are few, but then the principal milieux—exile training camps, Mafia safe houses, Klan shooting ranges, and the like—have never had a strong female presence. The latter two characters are ambiguous at best, while the rest of the dramatis personae are or become amoral. This does not prevent the three protagonists, at least, from being sympathetic overall.

Significantly, the only paragon of rectitude in sight is Robert Kennedy, and he is by far the least likable of the book's major characters; he is a prig and a stiff. At least the mobsters are assigned recognizably human traits, like humor (the Ku Kluxers, on the other hand, are clearly not human at all). The cast is crowded, but the characters are sufficiently individuated that there is no confusion for the reader. What does produce confusion is the endless flux of alliances and betrayals, which at times makes one wish for a flow chart. Kemper Boyd, in particular, moves from double agent to triple agent to quadruple agent and perhaps more, with his sympathies distributed as percentage points among a host of competing or inimical groupings.

The major forces are: Hoffa and his Teamsters, Hoover (who with a single exception appears only as a disembodied voice), the Kennedy brothers (although divergences between them eventually occur), the anti-Castro Cubans (although some of them work more than one side of the street), and the Mafia (although they at times split up into warring factions). Howard Hughes, only glimpsed briefly in the flesh (as it were), constitutes yet another, albeit distant, force, and in addition all three protagonists periodically break away from everyone else to act on their own initiative. Curiously, the CIA itself is barely represented—a single liaison officer to the Cuban exiles stands in. The action includes the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, seen from a distance, and various smaller-scale incursions against Cuba, as well as riots, gun battles, break-ins, cross-burnings, blackmail setups, torture, booze-fests, and hundreds of variously gruesome murders. There is a great deal of dialogue, much of it prevarication or dissembling when it is not pure, spitting rage. Although approximately seven eighths of the characters at one time or another express their desire either to kill John Kennedy or to have somebody else do it for them, the event itself takes place outside the book's margin.

Ellroy may not waste much time on atmospheric description, but he has a flair for conveying atmosphere anyway. He has a particular feeling for the dank sleaze of the Fifties and early Sixties, and seems to enjoy himself most when depicting two-bit lounge acts or writing in the cloyingly alliterative jive-turkey style of *Hush-Hush*, the (fictional) Hughes-bankrolled scandal sheet he has carried over from his previous novels:

> Item: Raul "The Tool" Castro has flamboyantly flooded Florida with hellishly horrific, hophead-hazarding amounts of the demonically deadly "Big H": Heroin!!! He's bent on needle-notching vast legions of Cuban immigrant slaves: zorched-out zombies to spread the cancerous Castro gospel between bouts of Heroin-hiatused, junkie-junketeered euphoria!

Of course, Ellroy's own style goes a long way toward supplying the ambience of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, since it seems derived in equal parts from the action pulps and amphetamine-driven disk jockeys of the period:

> Lenny preened and smacked kisses. The junketeers ate it up—go Lenny, go, go, go.
>
> Lenny hated fags. Lenny ate fags like Godzilla ate Tokyo. Lenny ate up the Lucky Nugget Lounge.
>
> Pete watched. Lenny spritzed shtick—fag Castro gropes fag Ike at the All-Fag Summit!!!!

or:

> Dracula loved his Mormons. Boss Mormon Duane Spurgeon glommed some dope contacts. Drac could now fly Narco Airlines without a Pete Bondurant ticket.
>
> The good news: Spurgeon had cancer. The bad news: Hughes scuttled *Hush-Hush*.

Except for the dialogue and interpolated documents, the book is entirely written in brief declarative sentences, active voice. Ellroy will never write a long sentence when four or five short ones will do, and he is especially fond of chains of hammerlike sentences headed by identical subjects:

> Littell remembered making threats.
>
> Littell remembered his final pitch: YOU'RE GOING TO TALK TO GIANCANA WIRED UP.
>
> He remembered a tire iron.
>
> He remembered blood on the dashboard.
>
> He remembered begging God PLEASE DON'T LET ME KILL HIM.

Actually, *American Tabloid*'s style may represent some kind of concession to the square reading public. In his last novel, *White Jazz*, he eliminated every unnecessary word and concocted a potent be-bop telegraphese:

> I questioned Western Avenue whores, three nights' worth—no Lucille pic IDs. I checked with the 77th Squad—still no locate on the peeper complaints. I peeped

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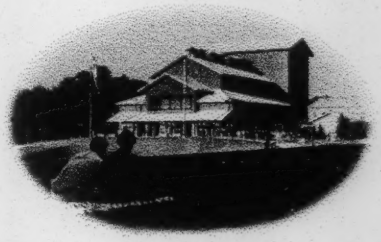

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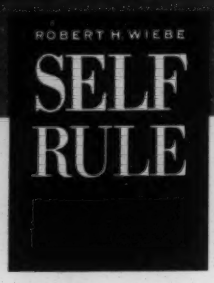

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myself: the Kafesjian pad, car-radio jazz to kill boredom. Two nights—family brawls; one night, Lucille alone—a window striptease—the radio pulsed to her movements. Three nights total, no other watchers—make me the only voyeur. That Big Instinct confirmed: prowler/peeper/B&E man—all one man.[3]

In both cases, Ellroy has taken the classic hard-boiled style, derived from Hemingway by Hammett, poeticized by Chandler, filtered by Cain, worried to pieces by Goodis, smeared by Spillane, and further reduced it, as stock is reduced by boiling. The style was hatched to convey tough action to semi-literate readers by the most direct means, grew baroque in some hands, was glommed by primitives whose native language it resembled, and now, with Ellroy, has reached an extreme of minimalist compression. It still makes for fast reading and a clear narrative, but its density and percussiveness make it hard to imagine in the pages of some pulp rag for men.

The prose's staccato insistence and the book's time-frame also act in concert subliminally to evoke the movies of the period. The spectacle of nerveless bad white men in Italian-cut sharkskin suits fitting silencers to gun barrels, moving impassively through go-go lounges packed with frantic revelers, consuming entire trays of highballs without noticeable effect, responding bluntly to the writhing showgirls draped around their necks, efficiently dispatching whole conference rooms of bald-headed honchos—the book retrieves such images from the memory bank, from movies like Samuel Fuller's *Underworld U.S.A.* (1960), William Asher's *Johnny Cool* (1963), and Don Siegel's *The Killers* (1964). It is not hard to imagine, say, Cliff Robertson as Boyd, Henry Silva as Bondurant, Frank Gorshin as Littell, Joey Bishop as Lenny, Eli Wallach as Jimmy Hoffa, Ronald Reagan as Sam Giancana... In action scenes and conversations, Ellroy's foreshortened sentences in fact behave like units of film, quick cuts worked up into montages; dialogues are never two-shots but always interleaved close-ups. Even so, this and most of Ellroy's other books stand little chance of ever being adapted for the screen—they are too crowded, too complex, too obsessive, and oddly enough too brutal.

American Tabloid is the least personal of Ellroy's books. His Los Angeles novels and the earlier trilogy devoted to the bent cop Lloyd Hopkins (*Blood on the Moon* and *Because the Night*, both 1984, and *Suicide Hill*, 1986) are very clearly the products of a sustained rage against an entire way of life. *The Black Dahlia* is most explicitly so. It is his extrapolation of the unsolved Black Dahlia murder case of 1947, "Black Dahlia" being the nickname of a B-girl and aspiring actress, Elizabeth Short, whose horrifically mutilated corpse was found in a Los Angeles vacant lot. In 1958, Ellroy's sexually restless mother was found naked and strangled in another vacant lot in that city. He dedicated his novel: "Mother: Twenty-nine Years Later, This Valediction in Blood." The book is wonderfully constructed and expertly paced, but at the same time it is completely over the top. Every horror merely serves to conceal greater horrors; questions apparently resolved get reopened again and again; the villains turn out to be stupefyingly depraved, and each is accorded an apocalyptic death. In this and other books, it is as if Ellroy were tracking down every suspect in his mother's (also unsolved) murder, in fact every member of every class that could have committed that murder, and inflicting upon them the most protracted and painful vengeance. His "bad white men" are his acknowledged comrades, and they are also his mother's killers. One does not have to know the facts of Ellroy's life to sense that a raw wound is somewhat latent in his work. It is hard to think of another crime writer whose books are so obsessively driven; even the work of Jim Thompson seems dispassionate by contrast. (Ellroy recently announced that he is working with a retired LA County homicide detective to solve his mother's murder. The results will appear in his next book, an autobiographical work to be called *My Dark Places*.)

And Ellroy is always in some measure implicating himself. His heroes are nearly as twisted as his villains, only distinguished by their mission of vengeance. In *American Tabloid*, each character is granted one dispensation: Boyd believes in racial equality, Littell believes in justice (but Jesuitically and with increasing cynicism), and Bondurant believes in romantic love (but not without an extortion angle). Robert Kennedy may also have a mission, but, Ellroy implies, it is unearned, therefore rigid, and therefore as good as false.

Ellroy renders convincing Kennedys—Jack Kennedy is an agreeably corrupt playboy who is safe so long as he is floated by his father, but fatally messes up when left to his own devices. Nevertheless, they do not possess half the vitality of his obscure lowlifes. This may be partly a matter of class background—they are foreigners in Ellroy's world of self-made shitheels—but it may also be that Ellroy feels hemmed in by documented history, unable to cut loose into pure delirium. *American Tabloid* is as bloody as any of Ellroy's other books, but it somehow feels more restrained, because its conclusion is foregone. Ellroy at full throttle, as in his LA novels, achieves a lurid phantasmagoria that is genuinely, frighteningly crazy. The reader stares into the abyss, and the abyss stares back.

If Ellroy is planning to go forward with his project of reimagining twentieth-century American history, he may simply have to rewrite that history wholesale and not worry about forcing his vision to fit known facts. He does, in any case, have a potent formula for serving up his vision. It is a marriage of two genres: the noir, in which actions are dictated by undead evil from the past, and the caper novel, in which bad people assemble to carve up whatever pie is at hand. Call them the crime-fiction translations of religion and capitalism—these two concepts, superimposed, can account for almost everything we think of as modern history. With this project, Ellroy may yet prove that "crime fiction" is a euphemism for the story of power, its acquisition and use. □

[3] *White Jazz* (Knopf, 1992).

Who Should Go to College?

City on a Hill: Testing the American Dream at City College
by James Traub.
Addison-Wesley/a William Patrick book, 371 pp., $25.00

Andrew Hacker

1.

In the history of American higher education, the City College of New York had a distinctive place. Excellence came easily to independent universities like Johns Hopkins and Stanford, which were well endowed from the start. Land-grant institutions drew support from their states' middle classes, enabling Ann Arbor and Chapel Hill to become prominent centers of graduate study and research. City College had no such clientele. For over a century it charged no tuition, offering education to students who otherwise could not have gone to college, and these students were able to meet high national standards. Harvard Law School saw the promise in a callow City College undergraduate named Felix Frankfurter. The school's alumni included a generation of first-rate scholars, including eight Nobel Laureates.

But this golden age was relatively short, running roughly from 1920 until the graduation of the World War II GIs thirty years later. Throughout this period its enrollment consisted largely of the children of Jewish immigrants. While supported by public funds, it was allowed to be selective; applicants had to come from high schools with rigorous academic programs and stand in the top quarter of their class. It was a true subway school, attracting impecunious students from every New York borough. Even those who could pay tuition elsewhere faced concealed quotas, limiting the numbers of Jews, among others. Without doubt, the City College of this era was a remarkable success, a social experiment that had a broad and lasting impact.

Its gothic campus is still where it was in upper Manhattan, where Harlem meets Washington Heights. But it is now a very different place, with a new wave of students and a changed approach to its mission. The contrast between then and now is the burden of James Traub's *City on a Hill*. A diligent journalist, Traub made many visits to the campus, where he sat in on classes and got to know undergraduates and professors. At first his accounts come across as affecting and sympathetic. Students found in him a confidant, and we get close to young people with such names as Abukar and Hyunsun and Fernando. Traub quotes the students' own accounts of their lives and aspirations, and he describes how they look and how they behave in class. These portraits make up the best part of the book.

Yet as Traub proceeds, his tone turns adversarial, challenging the current mandate of the college and the capacities of its students. Indeed, it soon emerges that he wants to raise a broader issue: whether, at City College and elsewhere, we are allowing too many young Americans to embark on higher education.

In some respects, today's City students are similar to their predecessors. Most live on meager budgets, and a subway school may be their only chance for a bachelor's degree. Many are single parents, work at several jobs, or have only recently arrived in this country. But the ethnic composition of the school is today altogether different from what it was. The most recent count, for 1992, found the student body to be 39 percent black, 28 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Asian, and 14 percent white. And these figures tell only part of the story, since fully half were born abroad. As often as not, black students are Dominican or Haitian, while the "white" students may be from former Soviet republics or the Middle East. Asian students, a growing group, tend to be enrolled in the well-regarded engineering program, which keeps its distance from the rest of the college. According to Traub, three quarters of all freshmen have to enroll in at least one remedial program. Among the foreign-born entrants, more than half need special classes in English in order to understand what is going on in their regular courses.

Leonard Jeffries

All this remedial work has been necessary since the advent of "open admissions." This policy, adopted in 1970, assures a place to anyone who can produce a high school diploma. Even with a low annual tuition of $2,450, many students apply for and receive financial assistance. (New York's Governor Pataki has proposed raising the cost to $3,450, with no increase in scholarship funding.) In practice, City College is not fully "open," since it admits about three quarters of its applicants, directing the rest to local two-year institutions which grant an "associate" degree. Still, the working premise is that if students arrive with deficiencies, these can be overcome with one or two semesters of intensive instruction, enabling an early transfer to the regular curriculum. To find out whether this faith can be translated into fact, Traub devotes much of his attention to remedial and introductory classes.

In a "College Skills" course, we watch a professor striving to teach basic skills that should have been acquired several years earlier. At the opening session, he holds up a headline from the campus newspaper: "Student Turnout Nil at Games." Only one student can decipher it, and his rendering is, "No one didn't go." While all had completed high school, many had never read an entire book, written more than simple paragraphs, or learned to take notes. Few seemed able to make the kinds of connections expected in dealing with college work. "There's a lot of daydreaming," the instructor told Traub. "A lot of these kids don't really think." In a "World Humanities" class, which was not a remedial course, a student confessed she could only make out the plot of *Macbeth* by watching it enacted on a video.

Students choose to attend City College, so we might presume they want what it has to offer. Yet in "Language Arts," the instructor we meet had to battle apathy and indifference, even passive resistance. "Lessons were forgotten from one day to the next," Traub reports. "Homework assignments went undone." Also among the missing skills is an ability to write coherent sentences. Students were asked to put on paper what they remembered most about their high school commencements. The following extract, Traub tells us, is a fair sample of the work that was handed in:

> The graduation had almost about everything but it had to go on a scedual. It had marching down the isliles, singing the school almata, which I never heard before, and the color guards.

Clearly, students like these are not ready to begin the first year of a baccalaureate program, which leads to the question of why they are even on a college campus. And if they are not ready, it is legitimate to ask what went on—or failed to happen—earlier in their education. Unfortunately, Traub did not visit any of the New York high schools that send students to City College. Perhaps he felt no need to, since by this time we have all heard about the deficiencies of inner-city classrooms. In fact, supporters of "open admissions" knew of these problems a quarter-century ago. But they argued that colleges had more sophisticated resources than high schools did for helping unprepared students improve their skills and knowledge. Here the title of *City on a Hill* can be taken literally: John Winthrop's vision of a new beginning, applied to the urban scene.

Two thirds of City College's undergraduates are black or Hispanic, and in some classes Traub attended, his and the instructor's were the only white faces. On the whole, though, the book says little about relations between race and educational attainment. Latin and African origins, of themselves, are not the issue. Some of City's most promising students are from countries like Ecuador or Ghana, where the schools are often more demanding than their American counterparts. The greatest failures are among students raised in nearby neighborhoods. And here the consequences of race are central.

Most black and Hispanic students from New York have spent most or all of their lives in sharply segregated settings, where they have very little exposure to the kinds of mental processes—quick and accurate reading, solving logical and mathematical problems—that will be expected of them at the college level. It makes no sense to call these skills "white," since they are increasingly the norm throughout the developed world. Indeed, Asian teenagers commonly outscore whites on standardized tests. But far too many of City's students come from schools whose students are almost all from poor black or Hispanic families.

Certainly these pupils are as inherently intelligent as any other youngsters, as virtually everyone will testify who has taught them in the elementary grades. But partly because of the racial uniformity of both the schools and their neighborhoods, the students have little hope they can compete successfully in the outside world or acquire the techniques with which to do so. Neither at home nor in their neighborhoods, moreover, do many of the students get the kind of encouragement they need for academic success. Thus far, schools that are all black or Hispanic have had great difficulty preparing their pupils for the kinds of tests they will have to pass if they wish to travel outside familiar territory. Traub concludes that even immigrant students move more easily throughout the city than those from inner-city neighborhoods, and know more about the larger world.

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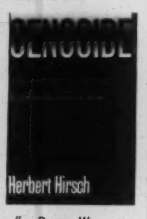

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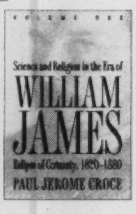

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Traub devotes the greater part of a chapter to Leonard Jeffries, City College's best-known faculty member. Jeffries's notoriety is ironic, since few people who have heard of him can name a single professor at Dartmouth or Stanford. Traub describes one of Jeffries's classes in which much of the lecture was spent commenting on Traub's own presence in the room. Still, Jeffries found time for a rambling harangue, with barbed assertions about the Jews financing the slave trade, about the superiority of dark "sun people" to white "ice people," and about, predictably, the "Jewish-controlled media."

> He talked about Hollywood, and the old racial stereotypes in the movies. He said, "This is the institutionalization of racism that *the Jewish community is largely responsible for*!" Now, for the first time, Jeffries was shouting. He talked about sun people and ice people. And then he came back to the Jews, the Jews who had run City College and had opposed open admissions. "We've never been given *anything* by the Jews!" Jeffries shouted [italics in original].

Jeffries is an obvious embarrassment to the college. He has long maintained his post as chairman of its Black Studies program, partly by playing on the guilt of white faculty members about the general failure to do more to help blacks and partly on the fear of reactions from black students if Jeffries were to be seen as a victim. Few other colleges with black studies programs have had to deal with teachers who have Jeffries's gifts for demagogy and few are as sensitively located. At one point, Jeffries warned that were any attempt made to curb him, "all Harlem would rise." But following a recent Supreme Court ruling that largely excludes administrative jobs from protection on grounds of free speech, it now looks as if he will lose his chairmanship, although his tenure as professor seems secure. In fact, Traub found that Jeffries gets less attention on the campus than outside. In a typical semester, fewer than 750 undergradutes out of 11,500 enroll in his department, and most study not with Jeffries but with other professors, including scholars from Kenya, Haiti, and Nigeria. (Some thirty to forty students attended the course with Jeffries that Traub observed.)

Clearly Leonard Jeffries enjoys attention and knows how to get it. Were he to remark that many Presbyterians owned slaves, he knows there would be no response. His statements suggest he is not simply anti-Semitic but is also fascinated by Jews and envious of their accomplishments.[1] Indeed, he boasts of having belonged to a Jewish fraternity as an undergraduate. Both Traub's book and other accounts suggest that only a small number of students subscribe to Jeffries's specific ideas, but that more than a few have been impressed by his defiance of administrative authority. For some students frustrated by academic assignments for which they are not prepared, Jeffries offers a flamboyant challenge to the prevailing structure of learning. My own talks with students suggest that most who take or know about his courses are aware that what happens in his classroom is not real education, although few would say this to whites.

In view of the classes Traub chose to cover, one can understand his overall assessment of City College as "a new model for higher education: the remedial college." He is right that a large if not excessive share of the school's resources is devoted to elementary instruction; but he might have made it clearer that unprepared freshmen make up only part of the total enrollment and that classes in the traditional liberal arts departments can be rigorous and demanding. Toward the end of the book, Traub describes a course in literary theory, with assignments on Barthes, Derrida, and Lacan, in which students spoke knowledgeably of semiotics, signifiers, and synchrony. In a seminar he attended, he was impressed by the cogency with which undergraduates analyzed the ideas of Wittgenstein. Still, he came away concluding that these students were "a tiny elite... isolated from the rest of the college." He also notes that most were white and that several had transferred from other schools with advanced status.

Similar standards prevail in the architecture and engineering departments, which attract students who can meet them, but those who succeed are disproportionately foreign-born. At issue is how many who start in what Traub calls "the remedial underworld" will emerge with the sophistication to understand science, Shakespeare, and Wittgenstein.[2] He concludes that very few do, and he doubts it is worth admitting so many students who cannot spell "schedule" in hopes that a few will make suprising progress.

2.

It will be unfortunate if Traub's conclusions are indiscriminately applied to other colleges. In fact, "open admissions" was not invented at City College, nor is it a recent creation. For many years, land-grant schools accepted all applicants. The famous biologist Edward O. Wilson got such a start at the University of Alabama. Today, some state campuses are quite selective. Berkeley takes in only 42 percent of all those who apply, while at Chapel Hill the acceptance rate is 40 percent. The comparable figures for Harvard and Stanford are 16 percent and 22 percent. However, most of those rejected by Berkeley can attend Santa Barbara, which accepts 85 percent, and the Greensboro campus in North Carolina lets in 80 percent. Even more "open" is the 95 percent rate at Oklahoma State University and 97 percent for the University of Oregon's Portland campus.

If state schools like these verge on universal acceptance, it is also true that few of them draw chiefly on students from inner cities. The students who arrive at state colleges with the least auspicious records tend to come from small towns or rural areas and they are overwhelmingly white. While many of them also need, and get, remedial work, they do not bring with them the cultural handicaps of students raised in Harlem and Washington Heights. Support for this conclusion is found in the Scholastic Assessment Test which, despite its many imperfections, still provides a rough measure of academic preparation. In 1993, approximately 14 percent of the 1,044,465 high school seniors who took the test came from families having incomes below $20,000. Among the white students in this presumably disadvantaged group, the average score was 872 out of a possible 1,600, while Hispanic students averaged 725 and the black figure was 693.

Photograph courtesy of City College of New York

City College, 1940

Obviously acceptance rates do not tell the whole story, since state colleges tend to draw on a varied pool of applicants. Yet the same holds for many well-regarded private colleges. Thus Reed College maintains its high reputation even though it admits 73 percent of those applying—as it happens, the same proportion as City College—as does Southern Methodist, which accepts 80 percent. It is also revealing that after the colleges have made their decisions the students make theirs. Even Amherst College gets fewer than half of those it accepts, while at the University of Chicago fewer than a third of those accepted actually turn up.

City College, moreover, is not even typical of other urban institutions. At Oregon's Portland branch, for example, only 5 percent of the students are black or Hispanic. Even the students on state campuses in Milwaukee and

[1] See my essay, "Jewish Racism, Black Anti-Semitism," in *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments* (Delacorte, 1994), edited by Paul Berman.

[2] For a more hopeful view, see the letter by Juliet Floyd, the professor whose seminar Traub attended, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 30, 1994.

St. Louis are largely white, since many of them are suburban commuters: fewer than 15 percent of their enrollments are black or Hispanic.

Along with admissions, a central concern should be the number of students who actually graduate, since that rate is related to how many are let in. At City College, even the elite engineering program loses half its entrants. A survey of the entire class that entered in 1984 found that only 3 percent had graduated four years later and only 28 percent did so by 1992, eight years after starting. Traub estimates that perhaps another 15 percent may finish at some other institution. He finds it "stunning" that over half of those who begin never receive a degree, and is disturbed that the rates are almost as high for the country as a whole. But here I would suggest that his distress is misplaced.

Nationwide, fewer than half of the candidates for the BA receive their degrees in the traditional four years. More than a quarter of all freshmen start as part-time students and accumulate their credits over an extended period. Many undergraduates request leaves of absence, sometimes for financial reasons or simply to take a break from studying, and then return later on. Twenty percent of Brown's students do not graduate with their class, while a quarter at Stanford fall behind. At Reed College, fewer than half take a degree in four years. At two major state campuses, Ohio State and the University of Iowa, fewer than a quarter of the students finish in four years. At Oregon's Portland branch, the figure falls to 6 percent. City College, with 3 percent, has the lowest proportions of four-year graduates, which is not surprising, since it has a higher proportion of inner-city students than most of the others on the list. In their talks with Traub, students often cite the demands of part-time or full-time jobs as the reason why they can't fulfill the academic requirements of a traditional college education.

Anyone who has taught undergraduates knows that there is a huge amount of transferring. Many if not most of the students who leave Reed or Ohio State end up earning degrees elsewhere. In some cases, the hiatus is quite long. Each semester I teach at Queens College I have students, now in their thirties, who had dropped out of college a dozen years earlier. The registrar tells me that almost half of the bachelor's degrees we award are to people who started elsewhere.

Nor, it should be added, has completing college ever been the universal norm. Approximately half of those who start college in the US do not finish. According to the latest census report, 24.2 percent of Americans aged 25 to 64 have at least a bachelor's degree, while 25.1 percent list themselves as having had "some college." Or, to use another measure, in recent years about 2.2 million freshmen have been enrolling each autumn, whereas some 1.1 million seniors graduate each spring.[3] Of course, the proportion of students who graduate varies from college to college. The table below gives the ratios for several schools with "four-year" undergraduate programs. Were all students actually to graduate in four years, there would be 250 degrees for every 1,000 students. In fact, when a college approaches graduating this many students, it is often because it accepts many transfer students, who have already been admitted to a college and have proved themselves there, and hence are more likely to graduate.

It is not self-evident that those who leave college regard it as a failure or a cause for shame. Many never intended to go the full course, especially among those who chose two-year colleges. Others want to find out if going beyond high school was right for them. In America, if not elsewhere, higher education has never been an either-or affair; the 33 million adults who started but never finished college during the postwar years make up a large part of the middle class. Some have technical positions, others are in sales or fields like insurance and real estate. Their average earnings ($30,978) are closer to those of high school graduates ($23,978) than men and women with bachelor's degrees ($40,367). But the gap is less wide than we might expect when we consider that a college diploma has become a credential that allows entry into most

[3]Educational Attainment in the United States (Bureau of the Census, May 1994); Digest of Education Statistics (National Center for Education Statistics, October 1994).

UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGES: ENROLLMENTS AND DEGREES IN 1992

Residential Campuses	Undergraduate Enrollments	Bachelor's Degrees	Degrees per 1,000
Stanford University	8,816	1,669	245
California, Los Angeles	23,647	5,726	242
Columbia University	6,134	1,377	224
New York University	15,236	3,036	199
University of Georgia	22,207	4,363	196
West Virginia University	16,014	2,791	174
Colorado State University	20,539	3,178	155
Commuter Campuses			
Tennessee, Memphis Campus	15,736	2,047	130
Queens College, New York	14,489	1,769	122
Colorado, Denver Campus	17,617	2,029	115
City College, New York	11,599	1,218	105
Brooklyn College, New York	11,239	1,185	105
Nebraska, Omaha Campus	13,531	1,364	100
Texas, El Paso Campus	14,609	1,421	97

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (1994)

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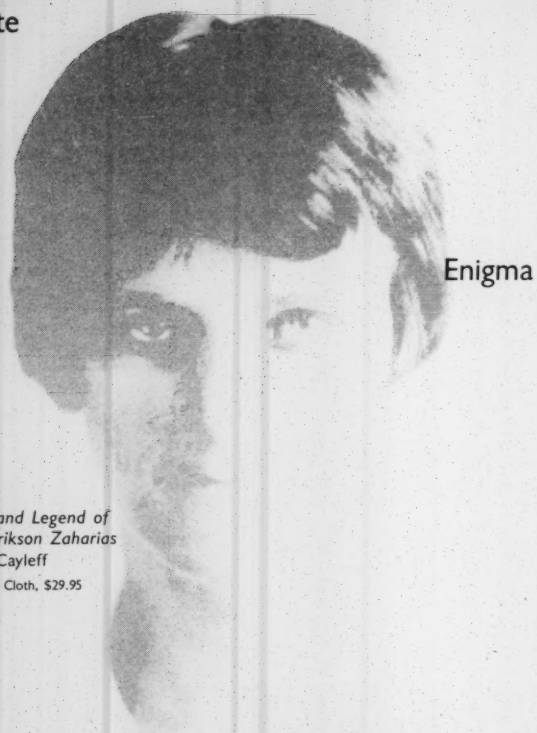

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of the more desirable middle-class occupations.

Traub liked many of the remedial students he met, yet he ended up feeling that "they shouldn't be admitted to City College," because "their problems are too profound to be addressed in a college setting." What, then, should be available to them if they want to continue their education? Some students wish they had been told they were not ready for college, or were being told now. Traditionally such students have had the alternative of enlisting in the military, or mastering a skill like air-conditioning maintenance or plumbing. Those who encourage students to make such choices argue that blue-collar jobs have their own satisfactions and, potentially, fairly high salaries and good benefits. One effect of expanding higher education has been to neglect training for occupations that supply needed services and require expert ability. Interestingly, such arguments for alternatives to college can be heard across the political spectrum. Liberals hope for an invigorated trade union movement, which can succeed only if there are increasing numbers of skilled workers. Conservatives, who believe that merit determines one's status in society, would follow Edmund Burke in assigning less educable citizens to "their appointed place."

Everyone can agree that students who want to go to college should have good preparatory courses in high school and this is obviously not the case with the many young people who are getting diplomas with eighth-grade reading levels. They cannot be sent back into classes for fourteen-year-olds but there are other possibilities. For many years, British schools have had an open-ended "sixth form," which students are entitled to attend for as long as it takes them to complete university entrance requirements. Something similar is needed for many American students who want to take on a demanding college curriculum but aren't ready to do so. Like Britain's sixth forms, post–high school programs could be given a special status that would make them attractive to nineteen-year-olds. Nor, apart from its cost, is this an impractical proposal: there are plenty of teachers who would want to work with students eager to expand their knowledge and build up their skills.[4]

While Traub shows sympathy for immigrants, he argues that they should not be admitted to colleges until they have mastered English. Adjuncts to high schools might also provide part-time language instruction, as evening classes did in the past. My own Queens College is much like City College, in that students who have only recently arrived in America are to be found in many classes. Some have difficulty following what is going on, and a few even ask me not to call on them since they can't express what they want to say. These young immigrants are here to stay, and their talents should be cultivated. Even now, they are providing a disproportionate share of our collegiate chess champions and Westinghouse science scholars.

Traub also suggests that more unprepared students could be assigned to two-year community colleges. This is already being done, including in New York City. At last count, there were 1,422 such schools, enrolling 5,723,203 students, most of whom have jobs and study part time, very often in the evening. Traub seems to endorse the theory that those who are not ready for a rigorous curriculum can spend their freshman and sophomore years in less demanding places, and those who show they are qualified could transfer to regular colleges. But in fact many of the students who currently attend two-year schools come for only a single course, which might be in car repair or how to survive a divorce. Others may be nurses or police officers who want some college credits on their records. While community colleges offer "associate" degrees, few of their students take them. The twenty-four largest of California's two-year schools enrolled 494,322 students in 1992, but awarded only 18,680 associates' diplomas. And of the 504,231 such degrees awarded nationally, only 154,594 were in the liberal arts.

Even so, some community colleges take liberal arts courses seriously, and many of their students respond to them. Berkeley, which is highly selective when screening its freshmen, makes a point of accepting as juniors students who have good records at two-year institutions. In the same spirit, Queens College welcomes transfers from Long Island's community colleges. How much larger a role should be given to two-year schools depends on one's feelings about how many of the 6,787,387 students now in our 2,190 four-year colleges should not be there. It is not hard, as Traub has shown, to identify City College students who should be doing something else. It would be interesting to know if he would also suggest corresponding cuts at Oklahoma State and the University of Iowa.

I am less optimistic than Traub about the odds of re-creating the "city on the hill." City College's current enrollment, even if many of its classes are remedial, can at least justify its large physical plant and tenured faculty. As Traub admits, raising its entrance standards would turn it into a much smaller college, with substantially higher costs per student. Even elite public universities now face unsympathetic legislatures and reduced appropriations. In some parts of the country they have already had to abolish programs and departments. And even if City College became an urban Amherst, it does not follow that a great many better-prepared students would go there in preference to colleges elsewhere. In contrast with students during the Golden Era of City College, smart high school seniors now have a lot of choices. But more should certainly be done to prepare students for work they too often cannot do. The British idea of an open sixth form, while it cannot be transferred mechanically to the US, still suggests the kind of reform that should be considered in New York. □

[4]One such program sends about thirty inner-city students to the Brandeis University campus, where they undergo a year of intensive instruction. It has had many successes, not least because it is highly selective and very expensive. See "60's Program Lives On at Brandeis," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 1995.

A Small Country's Great Book

Brad Leithauser

1.

There are good books and there are great books and there may be a book that is something still more: it is the book of your life. If you're quite lucky, you may at some point chance upon a novel which inspires so close a kinship that questions of evaluation (Is this book better than merely good? Is it some sort of classic?) become a niggling irrelevance. Luck has everything to do with it. For the sensation I'm describing has its roots in a poignant, tantalizing feeling that this marvelous new addition to your existence, this indelible Presence, has arrived by serendipity. Anyone who cares seriously about fiction eventually will get around to *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Madame Bovary* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Moby-Dick* or *Don Quixote*, and if you're somebody whose closest literary attachment is to a book of this staple sort, the satisfaction you take from it will not be graced by the particular haunted feeling of good fortune I'm talking about; you will have, instead, the assurance of knowing that your keenest literary pleasures were preordained. One looks differently on the book of genius that, even in a long bookworm's life, one might never have stumbled upon.

The feeling I'm describing may account for Henry Miller's pronouncement about Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries*, which he declared "is closer to me than any other book I have read.... Reading this book, I always feel as though I am reading another version of my own life." Or John Fowles's reverence toward Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*: "I am, in short, a besotted fan, and still feel closer to Fournier than to any other novelist, living or dead." Or Randall Jarrell's obsession with Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, which eventually precipitated the longest essay he ever wrote. (It concluded: "*The Man Who Loved Children* makes you a part of one family's immediate existence as no other book quite does. When you have read it you have been, for a few hours, a Pollit; it will take you many years to get the sound of the Pollits out of your ears, the sight of the Pollits out of your eyes, the smell of the Pollits out of your nostrils.") Or what Rilke felt about Jacobsen ("Of all my books, I find only a few indispensable...the Bible, and the books of the great Danish author Jens Peter Jacobsen"), particularly his *Niels Lyhne*: "The more often one reads it, the more everything seems to be contained within it, from life's most imperceptible fragrances to the full, enormous taste of its heaviest fruits."

No doubt Miller and Fowles and Jarrell and Rilke recognized that greater novels were to be found than the objects of their devotion. But what does this matter once you've met the book that seems made for you? For what we are talking about is a sort of imperishable romance, in which the flaws of a book are—like the flaws in the face of one's sole beloved—endearing. This is the real thing: a giddy incredulity that there exists in the universe so perfect an imperfection.

I don't suppose it's any accident that in three of the above four cases the book was written in a language foreign to its admirer, or that in every case the novel's author and its admirer came from different countries. Distance naturally enhances a sense of mystical unity—adds to it the wonderment of experiencing such intimate ties with somebody who worked at various removes from you.

And the book of my own life? I remember vividly my initial encounter with it. I finished its last chapters one late afternoon in Rome, seated in an all-but-deserted café. Outside a storm had abruptly blown in and a chill autumn rain was lashing the streets, and I read as though furtively, hunched over the pages. I did this for two reasons. The light had turned dim. And I didn't want anyone happening to glance my way to notice I was weeping.

Halldor Laxness

The novel was Halldor Laxness's *Independent People*. It always strikes me as a bitter irony that, in urging the book on someone, I often must first identify its Nobel Prize–winning author. But the facts are that Laxness won the Nobel many years ago, in 1955, and that he represents the smallest country ever to produce a Laureate: Iceland, with its population of a quarter of a million. All but one of Laxness's books (the appealing but slight *The Atom Station*) are out of print in English.

Still, *Independent People* is not hard to come by in the States. When it was published here, in 1946, it was a Book-of-the-Month Club Main Selection, and copies regularly turn up in used-book stores. Provided the price is ten dollars or less, I snap them up whenever I come across them. They make an ideal present—though some explanation may be in order when, arriving at someone's house for dinner, you hand your host not a bottle of wine but a dusty, almost fifty-year-old book, translated from Icelandic, about sheep farmers. At one point, I'd accumulated more than twenty copies; I rarely have on hand fewer than ten.

I might never have read *Independent People* had I not, in the summer of 1984, spent two weeks hiking in Iceland. However obscure a figure Laxness may be to us, in his native land he is a colossus without peer or parallel, and anyone drawn to Iceland will get around to him before long. The Icelandic literary tradition is of course illustrious, but nearly all the medieval sagas and poems that are its capital glory remain anonymous. Before Laxness emerged, prodigiously and prolifically (his career began in 1920, when he published his first novel, *Child of Nature*, at the age of eighteen), Iceland had never produced a modern writer of anything like international reputation. He has been translated into more than thirty languages.

Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, with which it shares all sorts of family resemblances, *Independent People* in its opening pages evokes the dawn of time. (And, like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Independent People* has been beautifully translated, in Laxness's case by an Englishman, J. A. Thompson, who has achieved a Hardyesque mixture of the flowery and the rough-hewn—a blending of an old-fashioned diction with a tough, understated humor.) Marquez's novel commences on a blue morning when the boulders in a stream-bed look like dinosaur eggs. *Independent People*'s first chapter summons up the days when the world was first settled, in 874 AD—for that is the year when the Norsemen arrived in Iceland, and one of the book's wry conceits is that no other world but Iceland exists.

The tale takes place among farmers habitually so impoverished that they "died without ever having transacted a business deal involving more than a few dollars at a time." These are men who might venture outside their valleys once or twice a year, hiking to a little fishing village to purchase a few provisions; for them, even Reykjavik is a misty dream. Nonetheless, they handle their language with pride. If none of them has ever seen a statue—as is revealed when discussion turns to culture on the Continent—they have the satisfaction of knowing that when that same Continent lost its way, during the Dark Ages, Iceland, with its sagas, was one of the bright literary beacons of the world. Meanwhile, their children dispute whether "foreign lands" exist, exploring the question with the same eager intensity with which kids elsewhere might probe the reality of Santa Claus.

The book is set in the early decades of the twentieth century but the dates of individual events are hazy. *Independent People* is a pointedly timeless tale. It reminds us that life on an Icelandic croft had scarcely altered over a millennium; the seasons shifted, but the overall pattern of want and hardship and stoicism endured. Midway through the novel, however, off at an unimaginable distance, something called the Great War erupts. Normally, there would be nothing new or noteworthy in this (on the Continent, people were forever "hacking one another to pieces like suet in a trough"), but this time the conflict lifts to unprecedented heights the prices for Icelandic mutton and wool. Even the poorest of farmers begin dreaming of an emancipation from their tight, tethered poverty.

War or no war, freedom has always been the aim of the book's hero, Bjartur. When the story begins, he has just finished slaving for eighteen years on the farm of a man he despises, the Bailiff of the district, in order to save money enough to purchase a pitifully modest holding, Summerhouses, and a handful of sheep. Bjartur of Summerhouses views the Great War coldly and gratefully: "I only hope they keep it up as long as they can." Ultimately, though, he cannot concern himself with the "madmen" in the South—indeed, can hardly concern himself with the affairs of the people around him. Of far more significance are the sheep around him. On their welfare his world depends. He is fighting his own World War, at once the most significant and the most risible conflict on the globe—the smallest war ever fought. He is a "*generalissimo*" whose troops consist purely of a dog that helps him round up his sheep. He tends to be much more comfortable with animals than with people.

His existence is less simple than it

Worth your time

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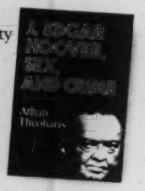

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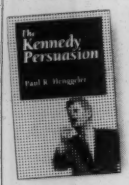

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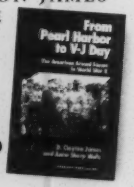

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looks, however. For his world of everyday deprivation, like that of Marquez's peasants, is encircled by a zone of enchantments. At the edges of life, magic is always afoot—although in Bjartur's case, all magic is black magic; the miraculous is no less malign than the mundane. Hence his combat is two-tiered. He contends with the hostility of nature—a terrain so cold and forbidding that starvation has always threatened the Icelandic subsistence farmer. And he contends with supernature—a curse. Long ago, the valley in which Summerhouses lies was inhabited by a murderous, blood-drinking witch, the fiend Gunnvor, who formed a diabolical alliance with the demon Kolumkilli. She was eventually brought to justice (she was dismembered), but her scheming spirit still blights the valley. To propitiate her, it is customary for passers-by to "give Gunnvor a stone"—to place a rock on the cairn devoted to her memory. But this, characteristically, Bjartur refuses to do. He scorns the "nonsense these old wives let their heads be stuffed with."

Marriage, both literal and metaphorical, is one of the book's great, dark themes, and therefore it seems only fitting that the local spirits of the valley embody an unholy—an infernal—alliance. One legacy of their union appears to be the withering of all romance in Summerhouses. Bjartur marries twice. His first wife, a furtively miserable woman, evidently agreed to move into his hovel only because she was, unbeknownst to him, pregnant by the son of the hateful Bailiff. She dies in childbirth, alone. His second wife, a sickly, broken-spirited woman who during the dark arctic winters scarcely rises from her bed, eventually collapses and dies after a horrific, famished spring.

Occasionally it is borne in upon Bjartur that his women are torturously unhappy. He senses uneasily (his relationships with women are never easy) that they, perhaps in response to his crushing, ruthless drive for self-sufficiency, his conviction that "he who keeps his sheep alive through the winter lives in a palace," have reserved to themselves some sector of their minds he cannot reach. But in time there comes to Bjartur a different sort of romance, a new form of "marriage": an affinity of twinned spirits. The child of his first wife survives its mother's death and Bjartur agrees to rear it as his own. This child, granddaughter to the Bailiff, belongs to the "enemy." But it turns out that Bjartur, for all his aloofness, harbors a clumsy warmth toward infants; he views them with some of the same tenderness he feels toward baby lambs. Looking down for the first time at this newborn girl, he

> marvelled that it could be so small and delicate. "You can't really expect it to be much of a thing," he added apologetically, "the way mankind is such a sorry affair when you come to look at it as it actually is."

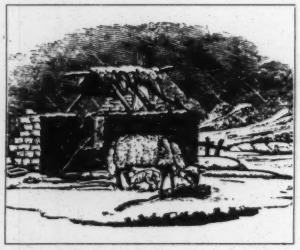
He bestows on her, just the same, a lofty name: Asta Sollilja, Asta the Sun-lily. She becomes his soul's "one flower."

In time, Bjartur's sun-lily reaches the gangling verge of womanhood. When she is about thirteen, he guides her for the first time across the downs. After hours of trudging, she can make out, far off, a "strange blue color" that "seemed to embrace all the mysteries of distance." She has to ask her father what it might be. It is the ocean, he tells her.

> "Isn't there anything on the other side, then?" she asked finally.
>
> "The foreign countries are on the other side," replied her father, proud of being able to explain such a vista. "The countries that they talk about in books," he went on, "the kingdoms."

They enter a fishing village and put up in a raucous and squalid lodging house, where they must share a bed. In the night, the frightened girl reaches innocently for her father and he, for a moment, responds to her sexually—he places a hand on her bare leg.

Aghast at himself, Bjartur leaps from bed and insists they strike off im-



mediately for home. His daughter, having sensed nothing sexual in his touch, is thoroughly mystified. But Bjartur will henceforth see to it that nothing like a sexual exchange arises between them. Their "marriage" must be altogether virtuous.

Asta's virtue soon crumbles, though. When she's fifteen, she is impregnated by a whimsical scholar who tutors her and her brothers (the man is also, it transpires, a "notorious drunkard and jailbird who is not only a parish pauper with a horde of children but also rotten with consumption"). On learning of the girl's condition, Bjartur strikes her and expels her from his home. He informs her that she has "shamed" him—which may be true, but of course he's also ravaged by displaced guilt and an unacknowledgeable jealousy.

So Asta sets out on her own, in an icy rain, in the middle of the night. For all of her new experiences, she's a fanciful child even now, dreaming of finding a lover who owns "lands with sun-gilded palm-avenues." But she will discover before the dawn that her papery shoes are ripped to shreds and that she is penniless and friendless. Still, she never thinks of retreating, of begging Bjartur for another chance. For it turns out that she, no less than this father of hers who is not her true father, nurtures within herself a proud independence. Somehow she will get by.

Years pass. Bjartur rises—his holdings expand until he, the former "slave" of the Bailiff, actually hires labor to help tend his sheep, cows, and horses. Asta sinks—she calmly describes herself as "starving with my little girl in an unheated cellar along the fjord." The two of them never meet. Neither will approach the other. Neither will relent, even after Asta contracts tuberculosis. Bjartur had always perceived himself as a soldier whose "war" concerned sheep, but it turns out that the true conflict of the book is between father and daughter. And the two of them are so evenly, formidably matched that it almost seems the novel can never arrive at any sort of satisfying resolution. Asta is the only person in the world who has ever managed to penetrate Bjartur's leather-like skin. She is an irresistible force. But he is an immovable object. And how (the reader is left continually wondering) can two such ever be reconciled?

I first picked up *Independent People* with faint misgivings, somewhat put off by both its title and its subtitle, *An Epic.* (In the original, the book is called *Sjálfstætt Fólk*—literally, Self-Standing Folk—which doubtless is more inviting.) I feared I was about to encounter an uplifting story composed in a firm nationalistic tenor—a rousing testament to the valiant and indomitable Icelandic temperament. Was this going to be a land of too much steeliness and too little irony?

But one needn't read very far to perceive Bjartur's utter unsuitability as any symbol of a nation's virtues. He's far too quirky and crusty for that. And too big a fool. The book is as much mock as genuine epic. When Bjartur and his dog first stride into the valley, and he utters the first word of the novel—"No"—it's clear that he's a poor man's Odysseus and his worm- and lice-infested dog is a cut-rate Argos.

Partly out of love for the book, I've now spent, all told, a year and a half in Iceland and I've met Laxness a few times. The first occasion was in 1986. He was then in his mid-eighties and growing confused and forgetful. When I spoke of my admiration for Bjartur, a look of perplexity gave way to one of alarm. "Oh, but he's so stupid!" he objected.

"Oh, but he's so *wonderfully* stupid!" I replied, and the old man peered at me, and pondered darkly a moment; then his features cleared, and he abruptly laughed with pleasure.

Bjartur is a man who seemingly can hold in his head but one ideal—financial independence, the belief that "he who pays his way is a king"—which looms so large he scarcely has room to entertain another thought. In his eyes, abstract speculation is a pastime for layabouts. At the rim of his thinking, though, other notions—strange ideas with arresting cadences—are forever seething. Iceland's rich, bardic tradition is in his blood. Gradually—almost shyly—the novel reveals that Bjartur is something of a poet. His verses, not surprisingly, have little to say. He's a man in a perpetual muddle, who can scarcely be expected to find any clarity in his lines. No, Bjartur comes to poetry, as to everything else, in search of a task to be fulfilled. Yet he is enamored of the old *rimur* of traditional Icelandic verse, with its obscure kennings and intricate forms: "His poetry was technically so complex that it could never attain any noteworthy content; and thus it was with his life itself."

Bjartur is for me one of the great twentieth-century literary characters—like Humbert Humbert or Jay Gatz/Gatsby or Gregor Samsa or the four

Makioka sisters. He is petty-minded and heroic, brutal and poetic, cynical and childlike. All these traits crystallize magnificently in the novel's great storm-scene, in which Bjartur, gone off in search of a missing lamb, gets caught in a blizzard. Before it's through, the storm will impose on Bjartur near-legendary trials. And yet, typically, these are interwoven with the absurd, for Bjartur's real problems begin when he seeks to capture a reindeer with his bare hands and the beast, its would-be captor slung over its back, plunges into a furious, icy river: "Here he was sitting neither more nor less than up to the waist in Glacier River, and that on no ordinary steed, but on the only steed that is considered suitable for the most renowned of adventures."

This journey deposits Bjartur on the far—the wrong—side of the river, miles from any shelter. In the dead of the howling night, seeking to stay conscious, he turns to a characteristic refuge:

> Seldom had he recited so much poetry in any one night; he had recited all his father's poetry, all the ballads he could remember, all his own palindromes backwards and forwards in forty-eight different ways, whole processions of dirty poems, one hymn that he had learned from his mother, and all the lampoons that had been known in the Fourthing from time immemorial about bailiffs, merchants, and sheriffs. At intervals he struggled up out of the snow and thumped himself from top to toe till he was out of breath.

Ultimately, it's a question of whether poetry—in combination with sheer cantankerousness—will suffice to keep Bjartur alive. The storm keeps raging. And Bjartur keeps fighting, and reciting. In the end, he is reduced to all fours, like the sheep he has searched for in vain:

> He forced his way at first with lowered head against the storm, but when he reached the ridge above the gully, he could no longer make any headway in this fashion, so he slumped forward on to his hands and knees and made his way through the blizzard on all fours, crawling over stony slopes and ridges like an animal, rolling down the gullies like a peg; bare-handed, without feeling.

At this moment, Bjartur might well consider himself alone in all the world. No one knows where he is, and were he to succumb to the blizzard, no one would know even where to search for his body. Indeed, he is still more alone than he realizes, since his wife—his first wife—is lying dead at home; she has bled to death in giving birth to Asta Sollilja.

Nonetheless, there *is* someone who has Bjartur uppermost in his mind—his maker, Laxness, who feels toward his creation so potent a blend of affection and exasperation that the book's every page reverberates with the tension. And the reader, too, is tracking Bjartur's every struggling step. For by the time you've passed through the storm with him, it's almost impossible not to be rooting for that monomaniacal, unkillable, wonderfully stupid old bastard, Bjartur of Summerhouses.

2.

When I tell people I meet that my favorite book by a living novelist is Halldor Laxness's *Independent People* and am asked what it's about, my reply is, "Sheep." This is a story (I continue) in which farmers are forever analyzing sheep and examining sheep: it's about tapeworm in sheep and lungworm in sheep and diarrhea in sheep. Whatever virtues the novel boasts, it's bereft of glamour.

My reply is actually less facetious than might first appear, for while the book does keep large issues constantly in mind (the largest: mortality and memory and love and duty), it is also very much about dung and sheep-parasites; it sets the reader vividly, unforgettably upon a farm. The book is about scything hay and rounding up stray lambs and hauling stones—all of it conveyed so painstakingly that you come away almost feeling that your hands are calloused with its tasks. In Bjartur's household there are no separate quarters for the animals, whose stinks and bleatings infiltrate even the dreams of the family. Before discoursing on the novel's grander intentions, *Independent People* calls on you to acknowledge the total, tactile claims of the land.

What is *Independent People* about? Like any big, great novel, it encourages a reader, earnestly wrestling with its scope, to encapsulate it into a single overarching theme. And like most big, great novels, it is varied enough that all such attempts are soon undone by the need for expansion and qualification. I've already said that at the heart of the book lies a war between father and daughter. But perhaps there is a still more pivotal subject: the war waged within a single spirit. *Independent People* presents the most gripping depiction I've ever encountered of the gradual, daily contraction of a human soul and its eventual salvation.

For in his victory over multiple adversity, in his slow and carefully husbanded prosperity, Bjartur somehow loses everything of import in his life. Near the close of the novel, he finds that he has attained what has always struck him as the summit of life—he has become rich enough to build a "proper home"—and he discovers his triumph is empty. Not only are both of his wives dead, but his children have died as well, or moved off. At last Gvendur, his remaining son—the boy he feels closest to—announces that he is emigrating to America. Bjartur is so disgusted he does not even bother to rise from the trench where he's working in order to bid a final farewell to his son.

And Bjartur is still standing in the mud when, a moment later, the novel realigns itself. Infinitesimally, everything turns. The book has presented the reader with cataclysmic events—deaths, betrayals, storms, love affairs—but when it reaches its climacteric, the narrative could hardly be quieter:

> Thus did he lose his last child as he stood deep in a ditch at that stage in his career when prosperity and full sovereignty were in sight, after the long struggle for independence that had cost him all his other children. Let those go who wish to go, probably it's all for the

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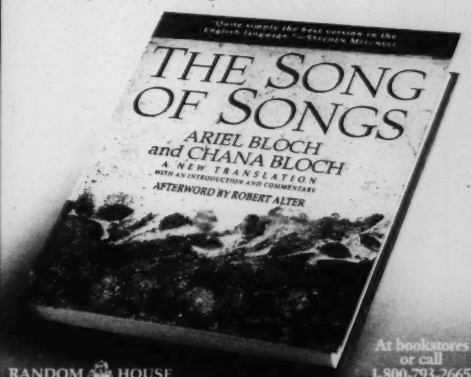

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best. The strongest man is he who stands alone... He had taken to his digging again. Then all at once some new thought struck him; throwing down his spade, he swung himself on to the bank; the boy had got a short distance away over the marshes.

"Hey," cried the father, and hurried after him until he caught up with him. "Didn't you say something about Asta Sollilja last night?"

"I was talking about giving her my sheep if you didn't want to buy them."

"Oh, I see," said his father, as if he had not remembered the connection. "Oh well, good-bye then..."

Bjartur may not yet realize it, but his life's underpinnings have been removed. He has vowed to have nothing more to do with Asta Sollilja (Hasn't she betrayed his trust? What concern is it of his if she's dying of consumption?), and he is a man who holds to his word absolutely. And yet he has, minutely, given way. He doesn't quite know what is the nature of that irresistible force Asta Sollilja embodies (it is love), but the immovable object that is his own soul has been budged. The remainder of the novel conspires to abase him. He must lose his wealth. He must lose his pride. He must lose himself to find himself—to find the decency within that would allow him to humble himself before his daughter.

This process is protracted. Bjartur's soul dilates as slowly as it has heretofore narrowed. He is a man of resolute obliquity, who could never bring himself directly to admit that he was wrong to have rejected Asta when she most needed him. So, as any wooer might, Bjartur begins his overtures toward Asta with a poem, which is delivered by Gvendur. It is an impacted verse of just the traditional sort that Bjartur admires—tightly rhymed and alliterated—in which he speaks of a stone and of a flower that has "fled." Asta Sollilja disdains the verses: "And tell him that I also know the empty, drivelling doggerel that he cudgels into shape with hands and feet. But I, I am engaged to a young man who loves me. He has been to school, and he is a modern poet."

Modern poetry? Contemptibly lax in Bjartur's eyes: "It's just like diarrhea. End-rhymes and nothing more." But merely so "no one shall say of me that I couldn't write in these simple modern measures," he prepares a second, more plain-spoken poem for Asta, again to be delivered by Gvendur, and adds a postscript, "No, while there's a breath of life left in me, nothing will make me go to her." And a second postscript: "But if I die, you can tell her from me that she may gladly lay me out."

Asta declares that she "can't be bothered to listen to it," and yet attends to it all the same. She then flies into a tirade—"While there's a breath of life left in me, nothing will ever make me go back to Bjartur of Summerhouses," but she, too, has an afterthought: "When I'm dead he may gladly bury my carrion for all that I care."

The two warring spirits already are largely reconciled. They are united eternally; in consigning their bodily remains to each other, they have pledged their bond in death. It is merely in the little, fleeting business of life that they are unworkably at odds—and the generous, ingenious way in which Laxness renders the unworkable workable, propelling Bjartur toward a reconciliation with his daughter, constitutes the most intricate and moving scene in this most intricate and moving novel.

So brilliantly drawn are Bjartur and Asta that they risk overshadowing the book's every other character. But with each rereading of the novel (six, and counting), I find myself marveling at just how accomplished are all the other characters in the novel. There's the credulous, book-loving Olafur of Yztidale, whose idolization of the printed word is such that he cannot conceive of a misprint; he confidently announces to a group of fellow farmers that, according to his almanac, next year's Easter will fall on a Saturday. And there's the querulous Reverend Gudmundur, who "had bigoted opinions on every subject, but changed them immediately if anyone agreed with him." Here he is bargaining with Bjartur over the funeral oration for Bjartur's first wife:

> "And how much do you think you can give for a speech?"
>
> "Well, that was really one of the things I wanted to arrange. Actually I consider that you owe me a speech from last spring and I think I might as well have it now. It won't improve with keeping."
>
> "No," said the minister decisively. "I will hold no sermon over a woman who lives in marriage for one summer only, then dies. You can think yourself lucky that I don't have the matter inquired into. There might be ways and means of letting you have your next marriage sermon for nothing, but to trade a funeral sermon for a wedding sermon is a type of jobbery that I'll have nothing to do with."

Even better—as good, in their way, as Bjartur and Asta—are Bjartur's third son, Little Nonni, and Nonni's grandmother. In this valley overlain by a supernatural curse, these two provide enchantment from a contrary, benign source. They are creatures straight out of a sunny fairy tale: he the enchanted third son, the dreamer, the little boy whose destiny is threaded with magic; and she the timeless, ageless crone, given to queer, perhaps vatic pronouncements, who serves as fairy godmother.

They, too, have a spiritual "marriage" of sorts. They are not merely sleeping companions; they complete each other—give to each other some quality without which life would be lacking. For Nonni, the old woman represents a feminine clemency and a patient approval which he lost catastrophically with the death of his mother. For the old woman, there is the suspicion that Nonni alone hears her, as she mumbles and maunders through her day. It isn't as though Nonni is actively listening to her prayers and her chants and her aphorisms. But the sounds of her voice are shaping him; her cadences will be with him forever. Nonni ties her, in her

floundering old age, to the land of the living.

How do we know her voice will stay with him? You might think Nonni's future would be a blank, given that he emigrates to America while still a boy, vanishing from our story. But as befits his status as the enchanted child of the fairy tale, Nonni is accorded special treatment within the narrative. Toward him alone, the novel repeatedly looks forward: "And when later in life he thought of those days..."; "All his life through he remembered it, meditating upon it in secret..."; "...The boy knew it well enough to remember it his whole life through"; "In years that were yet to come he relived this memory in song..."; "It was a sound that was never afterward to forsake his soul, however far he travelled and however resplendent the halls in which he was later received...."

Before she died, Nonni's mother invested her son with a task whose implications neither he nor she fully understood:

> "Listen, my dear," she said then, "I dreamed something about you the other night."
>
> "Me?"
>
> "I dreamed that the elf-lady took me into the big rock and gave me a bowl of milk and told me to drink it, and when I had drunk it the elf-lady said: 'Be good to little Nonni, because when he grows older he will sing for the whole world.'"

But what can these stirring words, *sing for the whole world*, possibly mean to a little, ignorant Icelandic farm boy and his miserable, landlocked mother? Nonni knows only that this quest involves foreign countries, and when the opportunity to emigrate arises he seizes it without hesitation. Though still only a boy, he approaches with gravity the maternal duty imposed by the elf-lady.

So Nonni disappears—only to remain. For he manages, present or absent, to suffuse the novel's every page: this boy who "in years that were yet to come...relived this memory in song" is the presiding genius of the book. He exits from the valley that he might learn to sing—and though the authorial hints are subtle, they also look unmistakable: Nonni has ventured forth in the world in order to write books like...like *Independent People*. Whether or not Nonni's boyhood circumstances mesh with Laxness's, he is a clear stand-in for the author. Quietly, almost parenthetically, Laxness remarks of Nonni that he is fated to become "greater than all other Icelanders." It's a roundabout and comely act of self-assertion.

Nonni's personality is set off strikingly by his older brother, Helgi, his soul's dark twin. *Independent People* offers one of the best portrayals I know of the tribal richness—the ritual tussles and the acts of obeisance and the reciprocal manipulations—that binds older and younger sons. The two boys are "complementary antitheses." They are both philosophers, given to elongated musings about religion and what would happen if time were to stop. But while the older boy is the unquestioned leader, a seeming tower of physical strength, it is he and not Nonni who will crack and shatter in the end. Nonni's softness will, paradoxically, protect him, for in his dreaminess lies his refuge from life's cruelty and rapacity. Helgi comes undone at his mother's death. Nothing, not even prayer to the elves in the rocks, will restore her, and he arrives, in his earnest boy-philosopher's way, at a terrifying nihilism. He claims to have seen Kolumkilli, the ghost-spirit who haunts the valley:

> "And do you know why I see him?" continued the other. Gripping little Nonni's wrists, he held them fast as he whispered into his face: "It's because I'm dead too. Nonni, look at me closely, look into my eyes. You see a dead man."

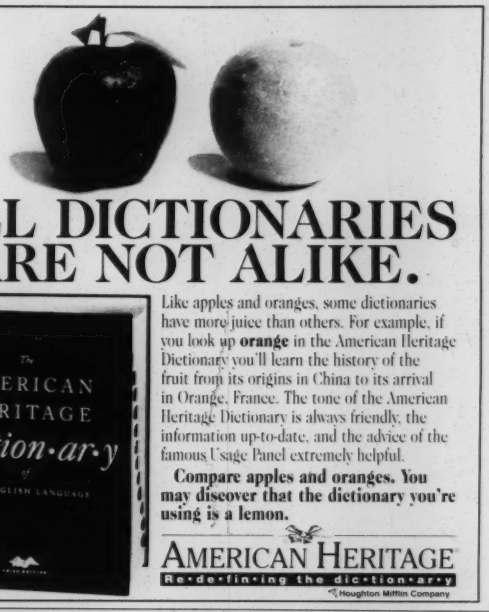
Helgi will nearly destroy the farm—bring ruination upon them all—before disappearing in the snow in a murky act of suicide. The presiding witch of the valley, Kolumkilli's bloodthirsty mate, Gunnvor, has claimed another victim. It seems the cycle is never to be broken. And yet little Nonni carries within himself the seeds of a magic greater than that of any fiend: he is, dawningly, the poet, the tale-bearer, the bard. The independent people of Nonni's family will be redeemed by *Independent People*. He will rescue them all through the high-soaring sorcery of Art.

When Laxness buoyantly referred to himself, by way of a stand-in, as "greater than all other Icelanders," he was making a claim that in time would become so overwhelmingly true as to look like an understatement. Given Iceland's tiny size and its subordinate role in modern history (it did not receive independence from Denmark until 1944), it's hardly surprising that Laxness is generally perceived not only as the country's foremost artist of the century but its most influential citizen. He looms larger than any modern statesman or religious figure. Not merely through his fiction but through his journalism and essays and political stands he has shaped the mores of his rapidly changing nation.

The reader who comes, unexpectedly, on the book of his life is apt to feel that nobody else fully appreciates it. This is an illogical feeling, of course—but why should our passion for books show any more sense than our passion for people? I'm continually having to restrain a boastful suspicion that I alone am *Independent People*'s ideal reader.

Reality has a helpful way of humbling such notions. Laxness once told me an anecdote that had obviously been heartening him for years. One day a taxi pulled up to his farm and a stranger emerged. It was an American who was in a rush (he had come from the airport, during a layover between flights) but who hadn't wanted to miss this opportunity to shake the hand of the man who had written *Independent People*.

Keflavik Airport lies some fifty miles from Laxness's farm. Cab fare for a round-trip journey of a hundred miles would have cost a fortune—today it would run you about two hundred dollars. Who would make such a pilgrimage? Might it not be the extravagant gesture of someone who feels he understands a great novel better than anyone else on the planet? □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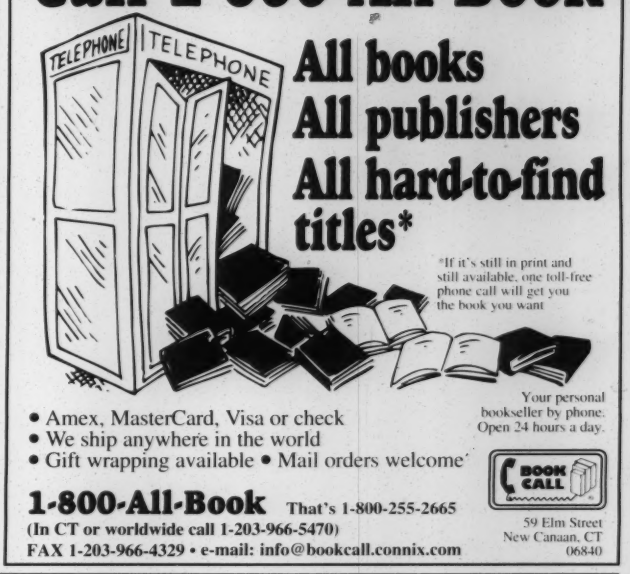
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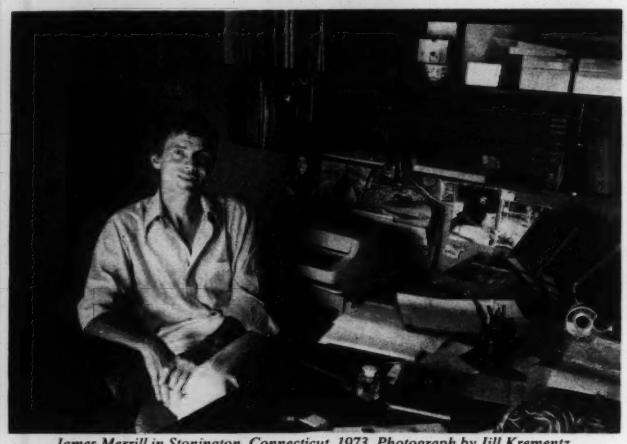
Chronicles of Love and Loss

Helen Vendler

A Scattering of Salts
by James Merrill
Knopf, 96 pp., $20.00

James Merrill, who died on February 6 of this year, gave his last volume the title *A Scattering of Salts*. In such a phrase there are overtones of tears, savors, and fragrances, yet with a clear implication, too, that these astringent crystals are scattered at intervals in the diffuse and oceanic medium of life. Merrill, for all the poignancy of his work, was a comic poet in the line of Pope and Byron and Auden; and from the very beginning of his long career, the poems he published combined, in sparkling ways, suffering and joy.

The son of the financier Charles E. Merrill of Merrill, Lynch, he spent his life after Lawrenceville and Amherst largely on his writing, teaching briefly now and then. Though he experimented with short plays and with novels—*The Seraglio* (1957) and *The (Diblos) Notebook* (1965)—and wrote essays (collected in *Recitative*, 1986) and a memoir (*A Different Person*, 1993), his reputation rests chiefly on his poetry. In succession he published *First Poems* (1951), *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace* (1959), *Water Street* (1962), *Nights and Days* (1966), *The Fire Screen* (1969), *Braving the Elements* (1972), *Divine Comedies* (1976), *Mirabell: Books of Number* (1978), and *Scripts for the Pageant* (1980). The last three, with a coda added, were collected as a trilogy called *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982). Subsequently there appeared *Late Settings* (1985) and *The Inner Room* (1988). Now, with *A Scattering of Salts*, twentieth-century American poetry marks the loss of a radiant and moving voice.



James Merrill in Stonington, Connecticut, 1973. Photograph by Jill Krementz

1.

Merrill's poems—his "chronicles of love and loss," as he called them—are often autobiographical; they tell the story of a child of divorced parents who grew up to discover himself intelligent, talented, and homosexual. "When it came to sex," he remarked in an interview, "I had to face it that the worst iniquity my parents (and many of my friends) could imagine was for me a blessed source of pleasure and security—as well as suffering, to be sure." His readers followed his life in Greece, Stonington, Connecticut, and Key West; they encountered, with some disbelief, the Ouija-board experiments with his companion, David Jackson, that gave rise to an epic trilogy; they read elegies for one dead friend after another: Hans Lodeizen, Maria Mitsotáki, David Kalstone, Howard Moss. As Merrill scattered references to family, lovers, friends, and fellow poets through the poetry—to his mother and father, David Jackson, Peter Hooten, W.H. Auden, Robert Morse, Donald Keene—it was easy for readers to assume that they knew about his life as well as his art. In fact, the apparent candor of the poems was their most disarming quality. Knowing how much of any poet's experience is altered, how much is unused, in his work, we can be sure that biography will eventually alter our perception of Merrill's life. What biography cannot alter is the poetry, which takes on an independent existence as the poet's life ends.

In the new volume, Merrill gives on almost every page the impression of looking back over the past, both as he lived it and as he wrote about it. *A Scattering of Salts* is an elegiac book, but one written in an ultimately comic spirit, with a Mozartian resolution into hope: Merrill's reprise of his life prompts a sense of renewal. In the moment of musical or literary reprise, one is conscious that some act or episode is returning, in life or in memory, defeating the putative uniqueness of original experience. Or, at least, one fears that with repetition the original experience may become decreasingly vivid. "After the first death," says Dylan Thomas, "there is no other." For the comic poet, however, the second and third and fourth loves, or disappointments, or even deaths are not merely the recurrences of the first; they also offer pieces of dry instruction.

What does love seem like when one takes it up (as has been said about second marriages) in the triumph of hope over experience? Or, to use another example from Merrill, what is it to see the entire *Ring* again at the Met late in life after having been transfigured by it, at twelve, in 1939? These are some of the questions that preoccupy *A Scattering of Salts*.

The lyric tradition is full of the poetry of reprise, from the most joyous (the reunion of lovers and the repetition of their *basia mille*) to the most tragic, when exhausted memory edges toward meaninglessness. Between the joyous and the tragic lay Merrill's own sense of suffused regret, of wry irony, of mortal awareness of mistake, of reluctantly acknowledged gains, and of comically presented new adventures. As he reached an age of increasingly frequent retrospection, Merrill found himself caught, one might say, in the poetry of recall; and with his compulsion toward perfecting forms to express different nuances of feeling, he looked to tradition but also struck out on his own, writing poems of a tonal variety unmatched by almost all of his predecessors except Byron and Auden. This command of tonality takes, in *A Scattering of Salts*, the full measure of the oblique sadness of comic recollection.

For contrast's sake, I recall an earlier, simpler, reprise, an incomparably touching poem called "The House Fly," published in *Late Settings*. Merrill's Greek lover, hitherto known in his poems only by his first name, Strato, is in "The House Fly" given his inescapably absurd (in English lyric) full name, Strato Mouflouzélis. And yet (says the poem) how one cherished love, how one cherishes even the increasingly memorial quality of its anniversary; and how one rises, although wearily, to reconstruct that memory.

THE HOUSE FLY

Come October, if I close my eyes,
A self till then subliminal takes flight
Buzzing round me, settling upon the knuckle,
The lip to be explored not as in June
But with a sense verging on micromania
Of wrong, of tiny, hazy, crying wrongs
Which quite undo her—look at that zigzag totter,
Proboscis blindly tapping like a cane.
Gone? If so, only to re-alight

Or else in a stray beam resume the grand toilette
(Eggs of next year's mischief long since laid):
Unwearying strigils taken to the frayed,
Still glinting wings; the dull-red lacquer head
Lifted from its socket, turned mechanically
This way and that, like a wristwatch being wound,
As if there would always be time...

Downstairs in this same house one summer night,
Founding the cult, her ancestress alit
On the bare chest of Strato Mouflouzélis
Who stirred in the lamp-glow but did not wake.
To say so brings it back on every autumn
Feebler wings, and further from that Sun,
That mist-white wafer she and I partake of
Alone this afternoon, making a rite

Distinct from both the blessing and the blight.

In this remarkable variation of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, the sleeping love god is the boy with the ridiculous name, and the cultic goddess is reduced from a butterfly to a house fly. One could say, thinking only of the transformed myth, that the poem is ironic—and so it is. Its reduction of the psychic Muse to a tottering, wronged, blind creature is hardly less than tragic; yet she is still capable of her grand toilette, and therefore no less possessed than formerly of *élan vital*.

The second myth informing the poem is that of the real presence of Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the rite of partaking in the body of Christ, signifying the impotence of death and the reality of transcendence. The "rite" of art—another recovery of a real presence—is, like the rite of Communion, distinct from both the "blessing" of incarnation and the "blight" of death, the blessing of love and its blighting by time. Placing his own rite somewhere between comedy and tragedy, Merrill preserves for it, in this beautiful poem, its own space, which, while painfully inflected by "real" house flies and proper names, keeps its memory impregnable.

The formal daring of the poem—evoking the memory of an affair with Strato through the Keatsian image of Psyche on the one hand, and the Christian sacrament of real presence on the other—betokens a confidence not only that the great myths, classical and Christian, apply to homosexual lovers, but also a confidence that love, as it is remembered, retains erotic and even religious grandeur in spite of its inexorable decline, as it returns "on every autumn / Feebler wings, and further from [the] Sun."

Much more could be said about "The House Fly," Merrill's ode to autumn, its house fly a direct descendant of Keats's gnats. But taking it as a model of one sort of reprise poem, I want to look at the different attitudes toward the past in *A Scattering of Salts* (a book dedicated to Merrill's most inspired commentator, the poet and critic Stephen Yenser). The conventional lyric image for a return welcomed without ambivalence is sunrise. Shakespeare: "For as the sun is daily new and old, / So is my love, still telling what is told"; and Stevens: "The oldest newest day is the newest alone." In the first poem of *A Scattering of Salts*, the poet, recollecting the love that moves the sun and the other stars, and imagining himself in a cosmic bath looked down on by that love, says,

On high, the love

That drew the bath and scattered it with salts

Still radiates new projects old as day.

The sun is the only creator without ambivalence about the daily recurrence of his daily project. The human author, addressing his reader, has considerably more mixed feelings about literary recurrence, since his new book depends on so many old themes. Never has the daily cosmological reprise—life itself—been more wryly described by an author:

TO THE READER

Each day, hot off the press from
Moon & Son,
"Knowing of your continued interest,"
Here's a new book—well, actually the updated
Edition of their one all-time best seller—
To find last night's place in, and forge ahead.
If certain scenes and situations ("work,"
As the jacket has it, "of a blazingly
Original voice") make you look up from your page
—But this is life, is truth, is me!—*too many*
Smack of self-plagiarism. Terror and tryst,
Vow and verbena, done before, to death,
In earlier chapters, under different names...
You'd like to think a structure will emerge,
If only a kind of Joycean squirrel run
Returning us all neatly to page I,
But the inconsistencies of plot and style
Lead you to fear that, for this author, fiction
Aims at the cheap effect, "stranger than fiction,"
As people once thought life—no, truth *was. Strange...*
Anyhow, your final thought tonight,
Before you kiss my picture and turn the light out,
Is of a more exemplary life begun
Tomorrow, truer, harder to get right.

The sweetness of the past, still evident in "The House Fly" has, at the beginning of "To the Reader," been almost totally erased. Recurrence is now merely an "updated" edition of God's favorite fiction, life, continually erased in one set of characters and reissued in another. Or reprise, considered as a tradition, is merely a set of literary conventions ("Terror and tryst,/ Vow and verbena") done to death. Or, as self-repetition, it simply has become "self-plagiarism." At best, it may participate in the "squirrel run" of the Viconian and Joycean recursions of *Finnegans Wake*.

If truth and life are not "stranger than fiction," if they are not capable of invention, then indeed "turn the light out." But in a surprising ending, Merrill's aesthetic revulsion turns into an ethical command. What is demanded of the reader, and by implication of the author, too, is not reprise but purposeful advance—toward a more exemplary life "begun tomorrow." Countering the honeyed, if weary, appeal of elegiac repetition in "The House Fly," "To the Reader" veers sharply from its initial cynicism to a more energetic demand, prompted by the imagined presence of the reader, for the new and the true. (The envisaged relation between reader and writer, one of affection, will strike readers of this posthumous volume with a pang, now that the light of Merrill's verse has been extinguished.)

In itself, the "once again" of late-life recall is harmless, but it is valued differently depending on its effect. When it threatens the loss of all newness, it can be dully horrifying. Yet when it evokes an episode of youth, it can be revivifying: as Merrill returns to rent the house in Athens he once lived in, he comments, "Thrilling to find oneself again on stage,/ In character, at this untender age"; and he suggests, by calling his Athens poem "Nine Lives," that he, like the kitten in the poem, may be less fragile than he seems.

Still, his dearest hope in the poem—to see in reincarnated form his dead friend Maria Mitsotáki—is frustrated. Though he returns, encouraged by his Ouija-board spirit Ephraim, to a familiar café ("the Bon Goût, where we always met Maria"), the poet not only finds everything in the café itself changed, but is also deprived of the longed-for encounter. The "always" of memory becomes "never again." And Strato the once-beloved is now a fearful sight: "Old troupers reemerge:/ ...from oblivion's verge/ Strato himself, whose bloodshot eyes (once green)/ And immense bulk confound the dramaturge." This distanced way of describing the recent encounter with Strato is later corrected: Merrill, attempting to catch a kitten, loses it, and comments, seeing the grief of the mother cat,

From being human we grow inhumane.

We have, it seems, methodically wrecked
Her world. Analogies are rife and various
To worlds like Strato's, now disaster areas
We helped create.

By and large, the return to Greece is bleak. Merrill concedes (in a passage alluding to Elizabeth Bishop's "Over 2,000 Illustrations") that he had hoped for renewal but has been disappointed:

Like Wise Men we'd been primed to kneel in awe
At journey's end before that child whose nature
Proved Earth at one with Heaven, and past with future.
Instead, the perfect fools we still are saw
A manger full of emptiness, dust, straw...

It seems that perfect renewals—a reincarnation of Maria Mitsotáki or the incarnation of the new Adam in Jesus—are impossible. Yet the desire for reincarnation always persists; even the shades in Hades, says Merrill in "Volcanic Holiday,"

subsist
On one idea—returning.
Generation after generation
The spirit grapples, tattered
butterfly,
A flower in sexual costume,
Hardon or sheath dew-fired. Our feet
At noon seek paths the evening rain degrades.

In yet another poem, "Alabaster," inspection of a semi-transparent slice of skin under a microscope becomes, under the magnification of pitiless memory, only a "pious autopsy," the visual recall of painful past experiences:

And if a tissue-thin
Section of self lay on a lighted slide,
And a voice breathed in your ear,
"Yes, ah yes. That red oxide
Stain is where your iron, Lady Hera,
Entered him.

And in this corner, boldly intricate
As agate, zigzagging
Bays and salients—plans of a fortress?—date
From his twentieth spring,
When we had set the dials at First Love.
Up here's the opalescent fossil of—

Dream on. Dodo and roc
Did without your pious autopsies.
Nor will the self resist,
Broken on terror like a rack,
When waves of nightmare heat decrystallize
Her lucid molecules to chalk.

When the alabaster of Merrill's title decomposes under heat, its chemical composition degenerates: it loses its crystalline form, and turns to chalk. We are expected, I think, to recall this instance of deathly decrystallizing when we meet, in the last poem of *A Scattering of Salts*, the intense and satisfying "recrystallizing" of the evening star into the morning star.

In the most allusive of his reprise poems, "Snow Jobs," Merrill writes a *Ballade des Hommes du Temps Jadis*. Though he is in one way glad that the snows—and snow jobs—of yesteryear are gone for good, he still has affection for his memories, even for his recollections of corrupt politics and

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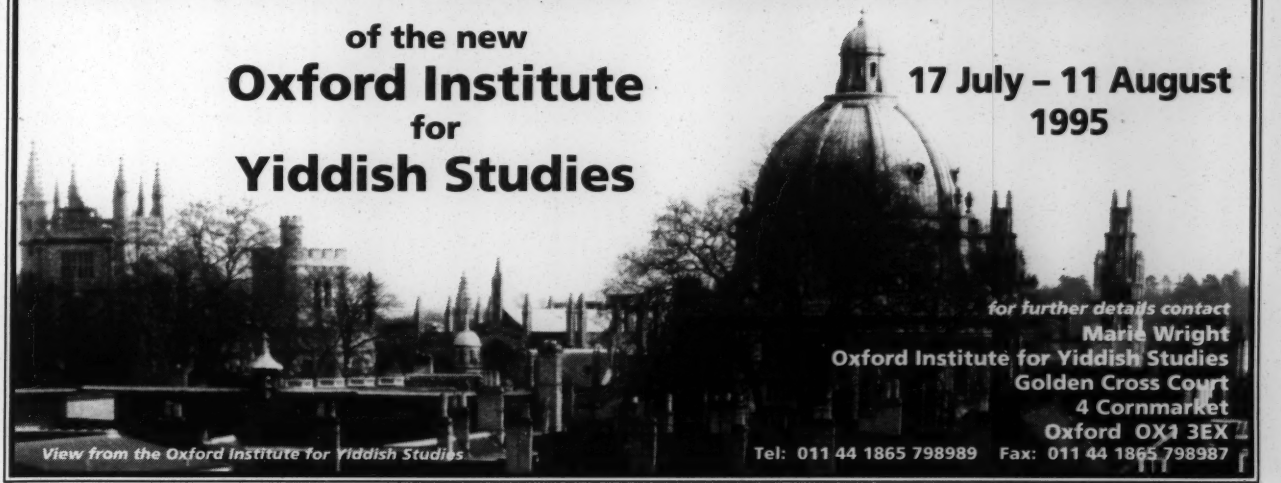

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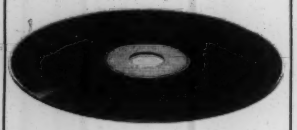

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politicians, collected in a comic list:

Where's Teapot Dome? Where's the Iran
Contra Affair? Where's Watergate—
Liddy—Magruder—Erlichman?
Their shoes squeaked down the Halls of State,
Whole networks groaned beneath their weight,
Till spinster Clotho darted near
To shroud in white a running mate.
Ah, where's the slush of yesteryear?

Even crimes have in refrain a charm they lacked in actuality.

When memories come closer to home, Merrill finds himself living in a Chirico landscape of what Hopkins called "the ruins of wrecked past purpose": "Here's a window onto a world of moonlit / Cubes and arches in ruins, populated by cats." In some moods, however, worse than recall is the incapacity for it, the forgetting of the past; in a dream retold in the poem "Novelettes," Merrill and two friends experience an episode of time travel in which the one souvenir and proof of the event —a fan kept by his companion—"falls from her sash, through cloud-shreds, past retrieval." It is art that brings us, as Whitman said, "retrievements out of the night"; without it the past is past retrieval.

And yet the image of "retrieving," Merrill thinks, is not really accurate; much of the time, the past seems rather to retrieve us. In an instant, writing can enable the leaping into the present of the irrepressible vitality of the past. In a consciously Yeatsian trimeter poem called "My Father's Irish Setters," Merrill asks, calling the dogs by name,

Dead lo! these forty winters?
Not so. Tonight in perfect
Lamplit stillness begin
With updraft from the worksheet,
Leapings and tongues, far-shining
Hearths of our hinterland:...
Dear clan of Ginger and Finn,
As I go through your motions
(As they go through me, rather)
Love follows, pen in hand.

In such a moment, the difference between present and past is almost erased, and the resuscitated images arrive with a force that seems external to the poet's mind.

Later in the volume, the poet issues a "Press Release," which tells us, in the third person, that he has been horrified by a glance at his awakened self in the mirror:

Buzzed awake, he turns
The light on—ah, how old! Who
could have envisioned
Twenty years' loneliness, ill health,
wrong turnings?

Yet in a book on evolution he finds encouragement to hope for a more positive reprise of the moral life on a deeper or higher level:

He opens a book, squinting to
clear his vision:
"Against such dark views, Na-
ture's best provision
Remains the tendency of certain
organisms
Long on the verge of extinction to
return
At depths or altitudes they had
once been unfitted
To endure..."

The next day, Carnival arrives to plunge him once more into disgust at repetition:

this scene's
Flats and floats trundled out over
the years had come
To seem less touching.

Nonetheless, taking Nature's advice, the poet decides to try a new beginning in altitudes he had once been "unfitted to endure":

So let us not
Act like children. These are the
Alps. High time
For the next deep breath. My
hand. Hold. Concentrate.

This is the heroic hope always arising to counter the staleness of life—that if there is no child in the manger, no returned Maria, there remain, in Wordsworth's Alpine words, "Effort, and expectation, and desire, / And something evermore about to be." This romantic ascent—the assent to romance—is here assumed to be conceivable till death, as when, in the poem "Pledge," Merrill toasts a divorcing couple, assuring them that their future experience may contain, like his own, a lucky finding of renewed love:

"You who have drained dry
Your golden goblet are about to
learn—
As in my turn
Have I—

How life, unsweetened, fizzing up
again
Fills the heart.
I drink to you apart
In that champagne."

Such hope of "fizzing up again" still avoids the moment of death, in which two impersonal forces meet—one of dread at life's stopping and the other of joy at evolutionary renewal. This moment finds its epigram in Merrill in a poem entitled, after Stevens, by a serial name ("Vol. XLIV, No. 3"), suggesting a magazine that has perhaps gone on too long. To represent perfection at the moment of its extinction, Merrill juxtaposes a Christian Christmas crèche to a pagan Christmas tree:

Dread? It crows for joy in the
manger.
Joy? The tree sparkles on which it
will die.

In "164 East 72nd Street," Merrill recounts replacing the old windows with new ones in the New York City apartment which he inherited from his grandmother. The apartment is full of the poet's memories of "things as they were." Yet "what remains / Exactly as it was except those panes?" (The play on "pains" can't be ignored.) And now the window panes are to be changed, along with the kind of life Merrill has been leading. A new monogamous regimen—one amounting to a second childhood, "once more good as gold" —is to blot out the purple past:

Our *life is turning into a whole*
new story:

Juices, blue cornbread, afternoons
at the gym—
Imagine who remembers how to
swim!
Evenings of study, or intensive
care
For one another. Early to bed....
. . . . .
Things done in purple light before
we met,
Uncultured things that twitched as
on a slide
If thought about, fade like dreams.
Two Upper East Side

Boys again! Rereading Sir Walter
Scott
Or Through the Looking Glass,
it's impossible not
To feel how adult life, with its
storms and follies,
Is letting up, leaving me ten years
old,
Trustful, inventive, once more
good as gold...

The distance between the Wordsworthian Alpine ascent in "Press Release" and this willed obliteration of the troubled past in the service of a regressive innocence is the most convincing proof that the poetry of reprise gave an intense impetus to Merrill's powers of imagination. And to his literary memory as well: the last image of reprise in *A Scattering of Salts* is the one most conspicuously traditional —Sappho's evening star which is the morning star, Tennyson's "sweet Hesper-Phosphor" of *In Memoriam*. Wallace Stevens, from whom Merrill drew so much, internalized the star as the oldest poetic symbol of renewal:

to say of the evening star,
The most ancient light in the most
ancient sky,

That it is wholly an inner light,
that it shines
From the sleepy bosom of the real,
re-creates,
Searches a possible for its possi-
bleness.

Merrill, in what may now seem a consciously valedictory poem, "An Upward Look," closes *A Scattering of Salts* with the hope that, as he watches the evening star become the morning star, he may find the clue to the mixed sadness and joy of recurrence in the cosmos:

halves of a clue
approach the earthlights Morn-
ing star

evening star salt of the sky
First the grave dissolving into
dawn

then the crucial recrystallizing
from inmost depths of clear
dark blue

Dissolving, the salt of life enters at death into the inorganic chemical solution that, in its recrystallized form, constitutes once again the physical basis of existence. As salt becomes star, the fear, resentment, disgust, and terror occasioned by death and the grave find a classically poised formula that is bearable to the imagination.

2.

In sketching the range of Merrill's imaginative responses to the inescapable process of looking back into the past, I have said little about his formal means, such as the recurrence of "re-" words—from "re-alight" in "The House Fly" to the final one, "recrystallizing." We find in *A Scattering of*

Salts countless other words of recurrence such as "once again" or "the seasons' round" or "anew." There are also the invokings of traditional images, from the Psyche myth to the Wordsworthian mountain ascent, from the *Ring* cycle to the morning star. And Merrill also alludes to prosodic forms of recurrence, from the ballade refrain of "Snow Jobs" to the repetition, in "Volcanic Holiday," of identical rhyme in seven seven-lined stanzas—reminiscent of George Herbert's "Sunday." Such devices show that Merrill was always conscious of the support given to a theme by form.

Two poems about Wagner's *Ring* cycle—"Matinees," an eight-section sonnet sequence published in 1969, and "The *Ring* Cycle," a six-section sequence of fifteen-line quasi sonnets in *A Scattering of Salts*—show how brilliantly Merrill used formal means. The earlier poem is a touching narrative of the long-term effects of the *Ring* cycle on a boy who saw it for the first time when he was twelve. It is not too much to say that the operas taught the precocious adolescent the range of profane emotion; they schooled him, too, in the artificiality of art. Countering Yeats's religious sublime in "Sailing to Byzantium" ("Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing / For every tatter in its mortal dress"), Merrill offered in "Matinees" an erotic sublime learned from *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*:

Soul will cough blood and sing,
and softer sing,
Drink poison, breathe her joyous
last, a waltz
Rubato from his arms who sobs
and stays

Behind, death after death, who
fairly melts
Watching her turn from him, re-
stored, to fling
Kisses into the furnace roaring
praise.

As "Matinees" ends, we read, in the last sonnet, the thank-you note sent by the young James to the friend of his mother who invited him to sit in her box. Prophetically, the note contains the sentence "I play my record of the Overture / Over and over." The young opera-goer is already an addict of reprise. Eventually the poet will have the conventions down pat: "The love scene (often cut). The potion. The tableau." Where, in the first instance, one interpreted one's own emotions through those seen in art, one now begins, by way of imitation, to create emotions to order: "The point thereafter was to arrange for one's / Own chills and fever, passions and betrayals, / Chiefly in order to make song of them." By the penultimate sonnet of "Matinees," set in 1969, reprise has become tatterdemalion. Addressing in double-entendre someone who is, perhaps, a former lover, Merrill says:

You and I, caro, seldom
Risk the real thing any more.
It's all too silly or too solemn.
Enough to know the score

From records or transcription
For our four hands. Old beauties,
some
In advanced stages of decomposi-
tion,

Float up through the sustaining
Pedal's black and fluid medium.
Days like today

Even recur (wind whistling themes
From Lulu, *and sun shining*
On the rough Sound) when it
seems
Kinder to remember than to play.

Full of puns though this is, it remains elegiac, like "The House Fly"; and though the circular structure of "Matinees," with its closing thank-you note returning us to 1939, is a comic one, the threat of too many repetitions annihilating the originals cannot be forgotten. Still, in spite of its elegiac moments, "Matinees" is focused on youth, with the development of emotional understanding through art. It is concerned more with the passionate authenticity of opera than with its artificiality. "We love the good, said Plato? He was wrong. / We love as well the wicked and the weak." It hails the thrill of the fictional as the curtain goes up on *Das Rheingold*, "No one believing, everybody thrilled."

And now, in *A Scattering of Salts*, we find "The *Ring* Cycle," a commentary on "Matinees." It begins with an offhand and rapid survey of the fifty years from 1939 to 1989:

They're doing a Ring *cycle at the*
Met,
Four operas in one week, for the
first time
Since 1939. I went to that one.
Then war broke out, Flagstad flew
home, tastes veered
To tuneful deaths and dudgeons.

Verdi replaced Wagner, with things German proscribed during and after the war. But the poet remains devoted to the memory of how the *Ring* brought him to his senses, in the full and literal meaning of those words:

Wagner had been significance
itself,
Great golden lengths of it, stitched
with motifs,
A music in whose folds the mind,
at twelve,
Came to its senses: Twin, Sword,
Forest Bird,
Envy, Redemption through Love.
. . . But left unheard
These fifty years? A fire of an-
swered prayers
Burned round that little pitcher
with big ears
Who now wakes.

It looks as if we are to be re-submerged in the twelve-year-old's mind as he sits before what Milton Cross used to call "the great gold curtain" of the Met:

Night. E-flat denotes the Rhine,
Where everything began. The
world's life. Mine.

But a poetry of nostalgia is not now Merrill's aim. The rhymes are looser here than in "Matinees," and this section of "The *Ring* Cycle"—like its companions—has fifteen lines, not fourteen: perfection is out of reach. And the glimpses of the opera on stage keep getting interrupted by flashes of real life. In section two, what happens after Siegfried and Sieglinde have declared their love?

Young love, moon-flooded hut,
and the act ends.
House lights. The matron on my

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left exclaims.
We gasp and kiss. Our mothers were best friends.
Now, old as mothers, here we sit. Too weird....
We have long evenings to absorb together
Before the world ends...

Superimposed, in section three, on this overlay of the *Ring* and its real audience is an overlay of the singers, their everyday life and their art: "Fricka looks pleased with her new hairdresser. / Brünnhilde (Behrens) has abandoned hers." And superimposed on this are the troubles of the planet caused by the petroleum-rich underwriters of the Met productions: "Erda, her cobwebs beaded / With years of seeping waste, subsides unheeded / —Right, Mr. President? Right, Texaco?—/ Into a gas-blue cleft." Section four, with equal matter-of-fact energy, looks at the long years required to train any *Heldentenor* or Wagnerian soprano: appended to the simple operatic moment "Brünnhilde confronts Siegfried" is Merrill's note about the singers' preparation for that moment:

Brünnhilde confronts Siegfried. That is to say,
Two singers have been patiently rehearsed
So that their tones and attitudes convey
Outrage and injured innocence. But first
Two youngsters became singers, strove to master
Every nuance of innocence and outrage
Even in the bosom of their stolid
Middleclass families who made it possible
To study voice, and languages, take lessons
In how the woman loves, the hero dies....

It is no more unseemly, Merrill now believes, to mention the repetitive labor of art—lesson after lesson to master scales and German—than to mention its artifice or its passion; and a second statement about the performance—"Tonight again... The dire oath... is sworn"—is followed by a sharp juxtaposition of social reality and aesthetic reality:

Two world-class egos, painted, overweight,
Who'll joke at supper side by side, now hate
So plausibly that one old stagehand cries.

The poet himself is an old hand at the stage, with several plays to his credit. But knowing all he knows about rehearsals, about artifice, and about the commonplace lives of the singers, he still willingly reenters the sorrows of the *Ring*.

How does "The *Ring* Cycle"—this rerun of the *Ring*, of childhood classmates, of performance, of rehearsal, of acquaintance, of love, of "Matinees"—come to an end? With another recurrence, of course—this time in dream, as the poet finds himself occupying at the Met the very seat bearing his name that his contribution has made possible. He takes his place, and

as I sink back,
The youth behind me, daybreak in his eyes—
A son till now undreamed of—
makes to rise.

Who is this son, who has so far existed neither in life nor in dream? He is, one could say, the allegorical figure of Reprise itself. If our biological destiny as a species is self-reprise by childbearing, surely art is childbearing on another plane. Which of us, created in our emotional lives by Wagner, is not the child of Wagner? Which of us, created in our emotional lives by Merrill, is not the child of Merrill? In *A Scattering of Salts*, reconciled to a repetition of the past for physical and spiritual generation and regeneration, Merrill sees his return to the *Ring*—even with his adult knowledge of opera's pedestrian and everyday aspects, its artifice and emotional fickleness—as the very resurrection of the life spirit.

This conviction makes possible a far brisker poetry of reprise than we were permitted in "Matinees" or even in "The House Fly." Words that could hardly have found a place there—"world-class egos," "too weird," "hi-tech," "hairdresser," "major funding," "overweight," "Walter J. and Ortrud Fogelsong"—sit easily and ironically next to the highest elegiac memory—"The world's life. Mine." The civilizing powers—of love over human nature, of music over time—still arouse Merrill's veneration. Around them cluster the ordinary, the commercial, the repetitive, the threatening, the entropic, but none of these, the poem affirms, can undo the transfiguring powers, indubitable even in their late-life recurrence, of love and music. I would not want to give up "Matinees" or "The House Fly," but I would grieve to have missed the mixed-diction wonders of "The *Ring* Cycle."

I should add that the polar opposite of reprise, for Merrill, is the current, the new, the non-nostalgic, the demotic, the trivial. The more a poet stretches to take in the heterogeneous without losing emotional intensity, the more ambitious lyric becomes. Perhaps because of its intense focus on recollection and recurrence, no book of Merrill's has been more defiantly interested in the new, however trivial, than *A Scattering of Salts*. In "Self-Portrait in Tyvek (TM) Windbreaker," we can see how directly reciprocal to the threat of the stale was Merrill's unregenerate delight in current fads. He visits "one of those vaguely imbecile / Emporia catering to the collective unconscious / Of our time and place":

This one featured crystals,
Cassettes of whalesong and rainforest whistles,
Barometers, herbal cosmetics, pillows like puffins,
Recycled notebooks, mechanized lucite coffins
For sapphire waves that crest, break, and recede,
As they presumably do in nature still.

Merrill's "Self-Portrait" ends with a song of summation, an aria making metaphorical use of one toy seen in the shop, the "lucite coffin" for sapphire waves. The toy gives Merrill his version of Shakespeare's metaphor describing art as a "liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass." The last aria envisaged by the living poet is, of course, incomplete:

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Emma Thompson by David Levine

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*Love, grief etc. * * * * for good reason.*
*Now only * * * * * * * STOP signs.*
*Meanwhile * * * * * if you or I've ex-*
*ceeded our [?] * * * ~~more than time~~ was needed*
*To fit a text airless and * * as Tyvek*
With breathing spaces and between the lines
Days brilliantly recurring, as once we did,
To keep the blue wave dancing in its prison.

No reader of Merrill will be surprised to find that the rhyme scheme of this penultimate "final air" of his last book is a new variation on *ottava rima*, in which the last line of each stanza, in its rhyme, is a phonetic echo of the first.

The loss of Merrill, for those of us who have been reading him for twenty or thirty years, is more than the loss of future poems. It is the loss of the voice "behind" the poems, the voice that had won our confidence over many decades of our own lives. It was a voice adequate to the confusions and elations of modern experience, as most voices in verse are not. And comic voices are especially rare in lyric poetry—voices that vote, one might say, for joy in spite of the emotional and physical worst that life has to offer. Highly intellectual voices are rare, too. In his youth, Merrill had feared that his intelligence might choke his emotional life; in a poem written at twenty-one, he worried about a

voice almost of youth, yet never pure,
As though the river of the tongue were clogged
By an upheaval of the intellect.

He need not have worried; the balance he found between the senses and the mind became ever more finely attuned, and the quickness of his spirit and refinement of his emotion kept him from both the sentimental and the conventional.

There are said to be, roughly speaking, two kinds of artists—the kind that innovates from within tradition, and the kind that announces a break with tradition. Mozart and Beethoven are the models in music for this division, and Spenser and Shakespeare the models in our early literature. Merrill, in this crude division, stands with Mozart and Spenser; original though he was (by his instantly recognizable style), he remained visibly content to use the lyric forms he inherited from his predecessors, from Sappho onward. Yet no form that he took up remained unrevised in his hands; and in the long sifting that time will do of his work, poets, anthologists, and critics will be repeatedly struck by his technical mastery, as they will be touched by his tenderness and surprised by his wit.

Merrill once wrote of the Greek poet Cavafy words that were true of himself: "Born... into a world of forms and frivolities, [he] was to be anchored firmly beyond its shallows... by his vocation and his sexuality." He will rightly be claimed for gay studies, but his great appeal to readers male and female, gay and straight, young and old, American and European, arises from the fact that, as he said of himself, "I was drawn to both sides of things: masculine and feminine, rational and fanciful, passionate and ironic." The breadth of his sensibility, and the candor and brio of his writing about a life by no means easy, ensured that many of us have got from him what he said he got in adolescence from Rilke: help with suffering. One doesn't forget the writers from whom such help has come. □

AN UPWARD LOOK

O heart green acre sown with salt
by the departing occupier

lay down your gallant spears of wheat
Salt of the earth each stellar pinch

flung in blind defiance backwards
now takes its toll Up from his quieted

quarry the lover colder and wiser
hauling himself finds the world turning

toys triumphs toxins into
this vast facility the living come
dearest to die in How did it happen

In bright alternation minutely mirrored
within the thinking of each and every

mortal creature halves of a clue
approach the earthlights Morning star

evening star salt of the sky
First the grave dissolving into dawn

then the crucial recrystallizing
from inmost depths of clear dark blue

—James Merrill

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The Amateur Hit Man

Norman Mailer

1.

The mystery of Oswald subsumes the enigma of Jack Ruby. Yet if the first mystery has haunted the American intelligence establishment with the fear that it is implicated, Jack Ruby buggers reasonable comprehension for the rest of us. A minor thug from the streets of Chicago with a mentally unbalanced and often hospitalized mother, he has Mob connections. While they are no more impressive than those cherished by a hundred thousand other petty hoodlums in fifty American cities—which is to say, connections so tenuous and yet so familial that one can make a whole case or no case out of the same material—he has grown up among the Mob, and is on a first-name basis with Mob figures of the middle ranks. He is of the Mob in the specific values of his code, and yet never a formal member in any way—too wacky, too eager, too obsessed with himself, too Jewish even for the Jewish Mob. All the same, he is pure Mafia in one part of his spirit—he wants to be known as a patriot in love with his country and his people. He is loyal. Select him and you will not make a mistake.

We all know his famous story or cover story. He was grief-stricken by the death of JFK, so bereaved that he shut down his strip-joints for the weekend, and was so appalled at the possibility that Jacqueline Kennedy might have to come to Dallas to testify in Oswald's trial that he decided to shoot the accused—"the creep," as he would call him. But only at the last moment did he so decide. No premeditation. At 11:17 on Sunday morning, after waiting on line at a Western Union office to send $25 to one of his strippers who was desperately in need of money, he crossed the street, went down the ramp into police headquarters, and ran smack into Oswald, who was being filmed by TV cameras in the basement as he walked with his police escort to a car that would take him to the County Jail. There, imprinting the American mind forever with the open-mouthed expression of the victim and the squint-eyed disbelief of his guards, Ruby killed Oswald. Never before in history was a death witnessed by so many people giving full attention to their television sets. Much of the world now believed that Ruby was a Mafia hit man. The logic of such an inference suggested a conspiracy not only to kill Kennedy but Oswald as well, because he knew too much.

The concept, clear as a good movie scenario, ran into one confusion that has never been resolved: Why was Ruby standing on line in Western Union waiting his turn to send $25 to a stripper while time kept floating away and Oswald might be moved at any moment? The question could not be answered. How many confederates—and most of them had to be police—would be necessary to coordinate such a move? No one who is the key figure in a careful schedule that will reach its climax just as the target is being transferred is going to be found dawdling across the street at a Western Union office with only a few minutes to go. It would take hours for a stage director to begin to choreograph such a scene for an opera.

Photograph © Betmann Archive

Jack Ruby in Dealey Plaza during his trial for the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, 1966

Ruby himself would say in the last interview he gave before he died of cancer that there was no way he could have been part of any calculation to bring him there at just the instant Oswald passed unless "it was the most perfect conspiracy in the history of the world... the difference in meeting this fate was thirty seconds one way or the other."[1]

So, the death of Oswald is filled with the groans of thwarted logic. Yet never on the face of it has a crime seemed to belong more to the Mafia.

In a brilliant book exploring the rifts within the American Establishment, *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, Carl Oglesby was the first to advance the notion that Ruby was trying to tell Earl Warren that the Mafia certainly did order him to commit the deed. If Warren would just fly him, Jack Ruby, back to Washington on that same day, he, Jack Ruby, could furnish Warren with all the truth and, to prove it, would take a lie detector test on the spot.

As one reads these declarations in Jack Ruby's testimony, it is difficult not to believe that Oglesby is right. In the course of a half hour, Ruby repeats his request five times.

Mr. Ruby: Is there any way to get me to Washington?

Chief Justice Warren: I beg your pardon?

Mr. Ruby: Is there any way of you getting me to Washington?

Chief Justice Warren: I don't know of any. I will be glad to talk to your counsel about what the situation is, Mr. Ruby, when we get an opportunity to talk.

Mr. Ruby: I don't think I will get a fair representation with my counsel, Joe Tonahill. I don't think so...[2]

He disavows Joe Tonahill. He is all but saying that he cannot know whom his lawyer is working for.

In another minute, he repeats himself:

Mr. Ruby: ...Gentlemen, unless you get me to Washington, you can't get a fair shake out of me.

If you understand my way of talking, you have got to bring me to Washington to get the tests.

Do I sound dramatic? Off the beam?

Chief Justice Warren: No; you are speaking very rationally, and I am really surprised that you can remember as much as you have remembered up to the present time.

You have given it to us in detail.

Mr. Ruby: Unless you can get me to Washington, and I am not a crackpot, I have all my senses—I don't want to evade any crime I am guilty of.[3]

Five minutes go by. They speak of other matters. Then Ruby pushes his request again, even takes it another step:

Mr. Ruby: Gentlemen, if you want to hear any further testimony, you will have to get me to Washington soon, because it has something to do with you, Chief Warren.

Do I sound sober enough to tell you this?

Chief Justice Warren: Yes; go right ahead.

Mr. Ruby: I want to tell the truth, and I can't tell it here. I can't tell it here. Does that make sense to you?

Chief Justice Warren: Well, let's not talk about sense. But I really can't see why you can't tell this Commission.[4]

Well, he can't. Not in Dallas. Ruby all but shrieks at them: You dummies!—can't you see that I can't tell it here? You people don't run this town. You can't protect me in Dallas. I'll get knifed in my cell, and the guards will be looking the other way.

Mr. Ruby: ...My reluctance to talk—you haven't had any witness in telling the story, in finding so many problems?

Chief Justice Warren: You have a greater problem than any witness we ever had.

Mr. Ruby: I have a lot of reasons for having those problems... If you request me to go back to Washington with you right now, that couldn't be done, could it?

Chief Justice Warren: No; it could not be done. It could not be done. There are a good many things involved in that, Mr. Ruby.

Mr. Ruby: What are they?

Chief Justice Warren: Well, the public attention that it would attract, and the people who would be around. We have no place there for you to be safe when we take you out, and there are not law enforcement officers, and it isn't our responsibility to go into anything of that kind...[5]

Ruby tries to explain it to them in the simplest terms. "Gentlemen, my life is in danger." Then he adds, "Not with my guilty plea of execution." (He has been sentenced to death by a jury in Dallas.) No, he is trying to tell them: I will be killed a lot sooner than that.

Mr. Ruby: ...Do I sound sober enough to you as I say this?

Chief Justice Warren: You do. You sound entirely sober.

Mr. Ruby: From the moment I started my testimony, have I sounded as though, with the exception of becoming emotional, have I sounded as though I made sense, what I was speaking about?

Chief Justice Warren: You have indeed. I understood everything you have said. If I haven't, it is my fault.

Mr. Ruby: Then I follow this up. I may not live tomorrow to give any further testimony... the only thing I want to get out to the public, and I can't say it here, is with authenticity, with sincerity of the truth of everything and why my act was committed, but it can't be said here...

Chairman Warren, if you felt that your life was in danger at the moment, how would you feel? Wouldn't you be reluctant to go on speaking, even though you request me to do so?

Chief Justice Warren: I think I might have some reluctance if I was in your position, yes; I should

[1] Interview of Jack Ruby by Lawrence Schiller, 1966, Copyright © Alskog, Inc.

[2] Testimony given before the Warren Commission is hereafter abbreviated as WC Testimony. Vol. V, p. 190.

[3] WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 191.

[4] WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 194.

[5] WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 195.

think I would. I think I would figure it out very carefully as to whether it would endanger me or not.

If you think that anything that I am doing or anything that I am asking you is endangering you in any way, shape, or form, I want you to feel absolutely free to say that when the interview is over.

Mr. Ruby: What happens then? I didn't accomplish anything.

Chief Justice Warren: No; nothing has been accomplished.

Mr. Ruby: Well, then you won't follow up with anything further?

Chief Justice Warren: There wouldn't be anything to follow up if you hadn't completed your statement.

Mr. Ruby: You said you have the power to do what you want to do, is that correct?

Chief Justice Warren: Exactly.

Mr. Ruby: Without any limitations?

Chief Justice Warren: ... We have the right to take testimony of anyone we want in this whole situation, and we have the right ... to verify that statement in any way that we wish to do it.

Mr. Ruby: But you don't have a right to take a prisoner back with you when you want to?

Chief Justice Warren: No; we have the power to subpoena witnesses to Washington if we want to do it, but we have taken the testimony of 200 or 300 people, I would imagine, here in Dallas without going to Washington.

Mr. Ruby: Yes; but those people aren't Jack Ruby.

Chief Justice Warren: No; they weren't.

Mr. Ruby: They weren't.[6]

In the pause, Ruby tries to inform them of the incalculable depth of the peril he feels:

Mr. Ruby: I tell you, gentlemen, my whole family is in jeopardy. My sisters, as to their lives.

Chief Justice Warren: Yes?

Mr. Ruby: Naturally, I am a foregone conclusion. My sisters Eva, Eileen, and Mary...

My brothers Sam, Earl, Hyman, and myself naturally—my in-laws, Harold Kaminsky, Marge Ruby, the wife of Earl, and Phyllis, the wife of Sam Ruby, they are in jeopardy of loss of their lives... just because they are blood related to myself—does that sound serious enough for you, Chief Justice Warren?

Chief Justice Warren: Nothing could be more serious, if that is the fact...[7]

At this point, Ruby begins to despair of reaching Warren with his message. He cannot know how great the odds are that Lyndon Johnson has already reached Earl Warren more than half a year earlier with an even more secret message—*lone gunman; no conspiracy; the calm and well-being of our country asks for nothing less*. So Ruby, in all the lacerated but still functioning wounds of his sensibility, is beginning to recognize that his own agenda is hopeless. If he keeps talking this way and Warren does not listen to him, then the record of this testimony could open him and his family to Mafia reprisal. So he returns—he reverts—to the sound of his own music, his operatic cover story: he invokes the name of Jackie Kennedy.

Mr. Ruby: I felt very emotional and very carried away for Mrs. Kennedy, that with all the strife she had gone through—I had been following it pretty well—that someone owed it to our beloved President that she shouldn't be expected to come back to face trial of this heinous crime.

And I have never had the chance to tell that, to back it up, to prove it.[8]

Since he has already spoken of threats to his life and to his brothers and sisters and Warren will not take him back to Washington, he now has to remove all onus from the Mafia. So he brings in the John Birch Society, but vaguely... vaguely... No one can follow him now.

Mr. Ruby: ... there is a John Birch Society right now in activity, and Edwin Walker is one of the top men of this organization—take it for what it is worth, Chief Justice Warren.

Unfortunately for me, for me giving the people the opportunity to get in power, because of the act I committed, has put a lot of people in jeopardy with their lives.

Don't register with you, does it?

Chief Justice Warren: No; I don't understand that.[9]

Back goes Ruby to Jackie Kennedy. It may not be very convincing, but at least it is a story that cannot be disproven. What with the way he has learned to talk, back and forth, in and out, about and around, nobody is going to get into his head and refute his tale.

Mr. Ruby: Yes... a small comment in the newspaper that... Mrs. Kennedy may have to come back for the trial of Lee Harvey Oswald.

That caused me to go like I did; that caused me to go like I did.

I don't know, Chief Justice, but I got so carried away. And I remember prior to that thought, there has never been another thought in my mind; I was never malicious toward this person. No one else requested me to do anything.[10]

"No one... requested me to do anything."

If a copy of this transcript gets out—and there are lawyers and lawyers' clerks abounding in the halls of Ruby's paranoia ready to rush to the wrong people with just such a text—he can always point to this line: "No one else requested me to do anything."

It is so serious to him, and so godawful. He, Jack Ruby—a good and generous man who fought his way up from the Chicago streets into a decent existence, a semi-decent existence, anyway—is now going to be executed by the government, or else he will be killed by some Mafia minion, some prison guard or convict, in a jail he knows is not safe, because of a crime he did not wish to commit in the first place.

It is monstrously unfair to Ruby, thinks Ruby, and more unfair to his family. The people outside who will punish him if he rats on them are evil. And evil has no bounds, as Hitler proved. So, if Jack Ruby tries to explain to the Warren Commission that he was only an agent in the death of Oswald, a pawn for the Mafia leaders who passed the order down the line to the man who gave him the order, then there will be Mafia leaders rabid with rage because he tried to rat on them. In retaliation, they will yet kill all the Jews. The safety of the Jews always hangs by a hair, anyway.

Let us try to assimilate the reasoning. It is not that Ruby is insane. He is, however, all but insane: He has an even larger sense of the importance of his own life than did Oswald. If they kill Ruby, feels Ruby, then all of his immediate family and his larger family, world Jewry, is in peril. So he rallies for one more attempt:

Mr. Ruby: ...it is pretty haphazard to tell you the things I should tell you... I am in a tough spot and I do not know what the solution can be to save me... I want to say this to you... The Jewish people are being exterminated at this moment. Consequently, a whole new form of government is going to take over our country, and I know I won't live to see you another time.

Do I sound sort of screwy in telling you these things?

Chief Justice Warren: No; I think that is what you believe, or you wouldn't tell it under your oath.

Mr. Ruby: But it is a very serious situation. I guess it is too late to stop it, isn't it?[11]

He makes his very last attempt. How many times will he have to spell it out? Can't they comprehend why he must get to Washington for these lie detector tests?

Mr. Ruby: I have been used for a purpose, and there will be a certain tragic occurrence happening if you don't take my testimony and somehow vindicate me so my people don't suffer because of what I have done.[12]

Yes, if I am killed, my people will be killed.

Mr. Ruby: ... Because when you leave here, I am finished. My family is finished.

Representative Ford: Isn't it true, Mr. Chief Justice, that the same maximum protection and security Mr. Ruby has been given in the past will be continued?

Mr. Ruby: But now that I have divulged certain information...[13]

[6]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 196.

[7]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 197.

[8]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 197.

[9]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 198.

[10]WC Testimony, Vol. V, pp. 198–199.

[11]WC Testimony, Vol. V, pp. 208–210.

[12]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 211.

[13]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 212.

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He has spoken too much on this day, he is trying to tell Gerry Ford. His security will be affected. "I want to take a polygraph test," he tells them, but "maybe certain people don't want to know the truth that may come out of me. Is that plausible?"[14]

If Ruby is not out of his mind, merely all-but-insane—that is, highly disturbed but sane—then he really does seem to be saying that he acted as a hit man. Yet there is still the odd wait on line in the Western Union office. How to explain that?

We had better take a look at a few Mafia sentiments concerning Kennedy. Indeed, we are obliged to.

For months, through all of 1963, there had been low sounds rumbling down from the summits. Jimmy Hoffa, for one, was livid on the subject of the Kennedys. A legal counselor for Santo Trafficante, Frank Ragano, quotes Hoffa as saying, "The time has come for your friend and Carlos to get rid of him, kill that son of a bitch, John Kennedy.... No more fucking around. We're running out of time.[15] Hoffa is, of course, referring to Carlos Marcello.

Not only was there a host of rumors after November 22 that Trafficante, Marcello, and Hoffa had given the order to kill Jack Kennedy, but indeed G. Robert Blakey, Chief Counsel to the House Select Committee on Assassination, concluded that "elements of organized crime participated in the plot to assassinate President Kennedy" (although, certainly, no smoking gun was found).[16]

Recently, Frank Ragano's book, *Mob Lawyer*, did offer one further line of dialogue, although no more can be claimed for such an item in relation to the assassination but that it is a teaser; yet Ragano does emphasize that Marcello and Trafficante certainly wanted Jimmy Hoffa to believe they were behind the assassination. "You tell him he owes me, and he owes me big," said Marcello to Ragano,[17] passing a message to Hoffa in impeccable Sicilian metaphor that a proper repayment for such a coup might be to receive a loan of $3.5 million from the Teamsters' pension fund for investment in a lavish French Quarter hotel that Marcello and Trafficante wished to open. Ragano's disclosure supplies no witness to their conversation but Trafficante (now dead).

Nonetheless, it stimulates one's own imagination toward two hypotheses, each of which, for our purposes, can point in the same direction. An hypothesis, no matter how uncomfortable or bizarre on its first presentation, will thrive or wither by its ability to explain the facts available. These two hypotheses are able not only to live but to nourish themselves on the numerous details Gerald Posner gathered from various sources in his long and careful delineation of Jack Ruby's movements during the three days, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, of Oswald's incarceration.[18] Indeed, Posner's chapter on Ruby may be the most careful and well-written section in his book.

Posner amasses these details to prove that Ruby was not acting under orders but was mentally unbalanced, and he gives us more than thirty pages of text as he follows Ruby's behavior after the President's death. It will be interesting, however, to use Posner's carefully collected details to support an opposite point—that Ruby killed Oswald under orders from above.

2.

Let us take up our two hypotheses. The first, and larger, one is that Marcello and/or Trafficante did give an order sometime in September, October, or November to assassinate Jack Kennedy. Given, however, the solemnity of such a deed and the dangers surrounding such an attempt, the precautions employed to wall themselves off from the act would likely have been so thoroughgoing that the order had to pass through a number of cut-outs, and each cut-out would only be able to identify the man who had given him his order. Be it said that the executive details of the assassination were left to people at the other end of the line—those who would do the deed. So great was the separation, in fact, that Marcello and/or Trafficante would not know the killer (or killers) or the date or the place. It could happen anywhere—Miami, Texas, Washington, New York—it would not matter. They would not be near any of the immediate details.

Immediately after the assassination of Kennedy occurred, they assumed—how could they not?—that it was the fulfillment of their order. When they learned, therefore, by way of radio and television reports, within the hour after Oswald was apprehended, that the suspect had lived in the Soviet Union, his fate would have been sealed. It is likely that with their encyclopaedic knowledge of everyone connected, even remotely, to their business, they would have known the name of Lee Harvey Oswald, because Lee's uncle, "Dutz" Murret, the husband of Marguerite Oswald's sister, was already familiar to Marcello because of this uncle's ties to Nofio Pecora, one of Marcello's lieutenants; moreover, it was no secret in New Orleans that the Murret family had been caused considerable embarrassment by Lee's defection to the Soviet Union in 1959.

The association was loose but heinous. Oswald, by their lights, was not only some kind of Communist but could now be connected, no matter how indirectly, to Marcello. If Oswald had been the hit man, he could not be relied upon. And if he were innocent, that might be worse. There were too many variables. The problem had to be removed. A quick order was sent out: Put a hit on Oswald. This time they were in a rush, so there were probably not as many cut-outs; and more than one candidate for hit man in Dallas may have been selected, either in the way of locals or out-of-state professionals quickly dispatched there on Friday afternoon. Ruby—so this hypothesis would go—was one of the putative hit men. He was an amateur, a flake, and might be lacking enough dedication to pull off the job.

But Ruby would have been seen as having two advantages: He was, when all was said, a part of their culture—he would be afraid to talk—and he had the huge and unique advantage of access. For every soldier they made, the Mafia knew the characters and habits of a thousand men. So they also knew that Ruby was on good, friendly terms with at least a hundred Dallas cops. Ergo, Ruby could get to Oswald. He might not be the best man for the job, but he was certainly the one who would have the best chance of doing it in the shortest possible time.

Word, therefore, was passed to him by somebody he saw on Friday afternoon. It would be rank speculation to fix on Ralph Paul, Ruby's oldest friend, a man then in his sixties, for Paul was gentle and had no more known relations to the Mafia than that he ran a restaurant in Dallas. Of course, it can be said that big-city restaurant owners are rarely without liaison to the Mob. Ralph Paul was also one of Ruby's closest friends and was owed tens of thousands of dollars by Ruby—which the Mob would also have known. Ralph Paul could have delivered a message: "Kill Oswald and *they* will take care of you."

If the question was how could Ruby do the deed and get away with it, the answer was that, with the right lawyer, Ruby would only receive a few years or, with a defense on grounds of insanity, might get away with no time at all. His financial condition could certainly be alleviated. His deep debts would be rearranged, and the money he owed to the IRS could be paid off. And for motive Ruby was furnished with a beautiful if crazy reason, or came up with the reason himself—which is even more likely—because the reason existed already as a kind of minor motive within him, a small infatuation: he was the kind of exceedingly sentimental man who would indeed have detested the pain it would cause Jackie Kennedy to testify in Dallas. Ruby had the first requirement for good stage performance—his emotions were quickly available, so available indeed that they kept intruding on his syntax, which is why his speeches to the Warren Commission are sometimes so hard to follow.

The above is the first hypothesis. The second is simpler. Marcello and Trafficante had made their noises back and forth with Hoffa about getting a hit on the President but, as Frank Ragano reported, they had issued no orders. They had merely fumed, and been afraid to make such a move. Yet when the President was killed, they had an opportunity to rake in some huge profits with Teamster funds, so they took pains to let Hoffa know that they had been the masterminds behind the deed. Indeed, Ragano hints at this likelihood in *Mob Lawyer*: "If there was a possibility of making big money, Santo and Carlos were capable of conning Jimmy into believing they had arranged the assassination solely for his benefit."[19] Now Jimmy could show his

[14] WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 212.

[15] Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab, *Mob Lawyer* (Scribner's 1994), p. 144.

[16] G. Robert Blakey and Richard N. Billings, *Fatal Hour: The Assassination of President Kennedy by Organized Crime* (Berkley, 1992), p. 145.

[17] Ragano, *Mob Lawyer*, p. 152.

[18] See *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*, by Gerald Posner (Random House, 1993).

[19] Frank Ragano and Selwyn Raab, *Mob Lawyer*, p. 151.

appreciation by diverting those Teamster pension monies into a loan for their hotel. The problem was Oswald. When he talked, assuming he would, Hoffa would be able to see that Marcello and Trafficante had had nothing to do with the death in Dealey Plaza. So Oswald had to be marked for extinction. Hypothesis One and Hypothesis Two may be at great variance, but they come to the same conclusion—given the need to move quickly: Jack Ruby is anointed to be a hit man.

That he did not see it as an honor is evident in his behavior. The assignment was equal to the total disruption of his life. Ralph Paul, if he was the last cut-out to Ruby, would have issued no personal threats, but then he would not have had to. To disobey that kind of order could prove considerably more damaging than the cost of doing the deed. Ruby could only guess who might have initiated such a project, but whoever the top man was, he would not be sitting far from the devil's right hand.

If we are now in position to see whether the details collected by Gerald Posner conflict or agree with the common point of these two hypotheses, the first question to pose is when Ruby might have been given such an order. The earliest time that one can reasonably suggest, from the recorded evidence, is when he talked to Ralph Paul, at about 2:45 that Friday afternoon. It was only an hour and a quarter after the announcement of the death, but then the move from above could have been quick. Marcello and Trafficante may have been renowned not only for their caution but for their speed. That Ruby called Paul, and Paul did not call Ruby, is not a fatal objection: Ruby could have been passed a message to call Paul by one of the dozens of people he saw after he heard of the assassination.

Posner: The Carousel's records show a call to the Bullpen [Paul's] restaurant at 2:42 for less than a minute. When Ruby discovered Paul was not at the restaurant but instead at home, he telephoned him there. The phone record shows he called Paul at 2:43.[20]

Mr. Paul: ...when I got home Jack called me and he said, "Did you hear what happened?" I said, "Yes; I heard it on the air." He says, "Isn't that a terrible thing?" I said, "Yes; Jack." He said, "I made up my mind. I'm going to close it [the Carousel] down."...

Mr. Hubert: Did he discuss with you whether he should close down?

Mr. Paul: No; he didn't discuss it. He told me he was going to close down.[21]

Unless it was Paul who told him to, Ralph Paul, as the message bearer, could well have said: "Jack, you've got to close down for the next couple of days. You are going to need all your free time to find a way to bring this off."

Posner presents evidence that would oppose such an assumption. Ruby is very emotional in the office of the *Dallas Morning News* after he first hears of the attack, and speaks already of how awful it is for Jackie Kennedy and her children. He is crying when he leaves the newspaper office. This, however, is only by Ruby's own account to the Warren Commission: "I left the building and I went down and got my car, and I couldn't stop crying..."[22] But he may have been lying, particularly if he did not start crying until later that day.

In any event, he visits his sister twice that afternoon, and by then, if this thesis is of value, had probably been given the word. Certainly his behavior suggests much inner turmoil. His sister was ill in bed, having just returned to her home a few days before, following an abdominal operation, and he had gone out to shop for her.

Posner: Ruby was back at Eva's by 5:30 and stayed for two hours.

Eva said he returned with "enough groceries for 20 people...but he didn't know what he was doing then." He told her that he wanted to close the clubs. "And he said, 'Listen, we are broke anyway, so I will be a broken millionaire. I am going to close for three days.'" In dire financial straits, and barely breaking even with both clubs open seven days a week, his decision to close was an important gesture...

But his sister Eva witnessed the real depth of his anguish, and unwittingly contributed to it. "He was sitting on this chair and crying.... He was sick to his stomach...and went into the bathroom.... He looked terrible."[23]

As she says to the Warren Commission:

Mrs. Grant: ...he just wasn't himself, and truthfully, so help me, [he said] "Somebody tore my heart out," and he says, "I didn't even feel so bad when pops died because poppa was an old man."[24]

This, she indicates, is the worst state she has ever seen him in. From what she says he sounds more like a man who fears his own life may soon be ended than someone grieving over the assassination. It is all very well to take a shot at Oswald, but what if he, Jack Ruby, is mowed down in the process?

Once he left his sister's house, he went over to police headquarters at City Hall, where Oswald was being interrogated. He never had had trouble getting in before, and now, given the exceptional influx of newsmen, there was no difficulty at all. From 6:00 PM on, he was there, expecting, but not knowing whether he would have, an opportunity to get near enough to Oswald to do the job.

Posner: John Rutledge, the night police reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, knew Ruby. He saw him step off the elevator, hunched between two out-of-state reporters with press identifications on their coats. "The three of

[20]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 374, citing Warren Commission Exhibit 2303, Vol. XXV, p. 27.

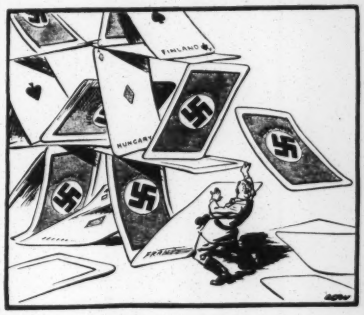
[21]WC Testimony, Vol. XIV, p. 151.

[22]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 185.

[23]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 376.

[24]WC Testimony, Vol. XIV, p. 468.

PEACE?



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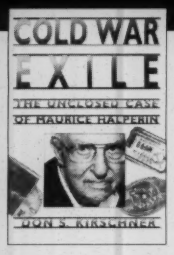

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them just walked past policemen, around the corner, past those cameras and lights, and on down the hall," recalled Rutledge. The next time Rutledge saw him, he was standing outside room 317, where Oswald was being interrogated, and "he was explaining to members of the out-of-state press who everybody was that came in and out of the door.... There would be a thousand questions shot at him at once, and Jack would straighten them all out...." Soon several detectives walked by, and one recognized him. "Hey, Jack, what are you doing here?" "I am helping all these fellows," Ruby said, pointing to the pack of reporters...

Victor Robertson, a WFAA Radio reporter, also knew Ruby. He saw him approach the door to the office where Oswald was being interrogated and start to open it. "He had the door open a few inches," recalled Robertson, "and began to step into the room, and the two officers stopped him.... One of them said, 'You can't go in there, Jack.'"

Ruby probably left police headquarters shortly after 8:30...[25]

He had failed in his first attempt. Now he made a quick trip to his apartment, where he found George Senator, his roommate, at home. Senator later stated in an affidavit that it happened to be the "first time I ever saw tears in his eyes."[26] Then Ruby went on to his synagogue. No surprise if he was ready to pray.

Posner: He cried openly at the synagogue. "They didn't believe a guy like Jack would ever cry," said his brother Hyman. "Jack never cried in his life. He is not that kind of a guy..."[27]

Yes, he will tell people, he simply cannot bear the thought of that beautiful woman, the former First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, being obliged to return to Dallas and testify. You pay your money and you take your choice, but as a betting proposition—with all due respect to Jacqueline Kennedy—it must be 18 to 5 that Ruby is thinking of himself. And if it were anyone but Jacqueline Kennedy, the odds might be 99 to 1 that he is brooding about no one but himself. All he has is his life, and it is being taken away from him. A precious gem, a ruby, is about to be thrown into the crapper.

After the synagogue, he went right back to police headquarters.

Posner: When he arrived at the third floor of the station, he encountered a uniformed officer who did not recognize him. Ruby saw several detectives he knew, shouted to them, and they helped him get inside. Once there, he said he was "carried away with the excitement of history." Detective A. M. Eberhardt, who knew Ruby and had been at his club, was in the burglary-and-theft section when Jack "stuck his head in our door and hollered at us.... He came in and said hello to me, shook hands with me. I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was a translator for the newspapers.... He said, 'I am here as a reporter' and he took the notebook and hit it."[28]

He has taken cognizance of the situation. He has not been a vendor in ball parks and burlesque houses and a street hustler for too little: he is laying the groundwork to become indispensable to any number of reporters. He never knows when the right door will open and the opportunity will be there. This is the field of operations, and he may have a chance to try again before midnight.

Posner: In less than half an hour, Oswald was brought out of room 317 on the way to the basement assembly room for the midnight press conference. Ruby recalled that as Oswald walked past, "I was standing about two or three feet away."[29]

The challenge has to be equivalent to jumping for the first time into a quarry pool from a height of forty or fifty feet. And Ruby cannot take the step. All he has to do is pull out his gun and finish Oswald off, but he cannot make the move. It is, after all, a vertiginous leap.

He is sick at his own cowardice, even as all of us are when we fail to take that daring little jump which some higher instinct, or a bully, or a parent, or a brother, is commanding us to take.

Posner: In his first statement to the FBI, Ruby admitted he had his .38 caliber revolver with him on Friday night (Commission Document 1252.9). Later, when he realized that carrying his pistol might be construed as evidence of premeditation, he said he did not have his gun on Friday. However, a photo of the rear of Ruby, taken in the third-floor corridor that night, shows a lump under the right rear of his jacket. If he was a mob-hired killer with a contract on Oswald, he would have shot him at the first opportunity. Certainly, any contract to kill Oswald would not have been one Ruby could fulfill at his leisure. Yet when he had the perfect opportunity, with Oswald only a couple of feet away, Ruby did not shoot him.[30]

Posner may lack empathy here. Just because you are told to kill Oswald doesn't mean you can do it. Indeed, Ruby may still be looking for some way to perform the act and yet get out scot-free. That is a fantasy, but then, he is not a professional killer. What he cannot stomach is that there seems no way he will be able to follow orders without paying a prohibitive price.

In the meantime, to cut the losses to his ego, he continues networking. Soon he is talking to Ike Pappas, a reporter for WNEW in New York.

Mr. Pappas: It was at this point that I ran into Ruby—the first time that I recall. He came up to me as I was waiting for [Henry Wade, the Dallas District Attorney] and he said... "Are you a reporter?" I said, "Yes." ...And he reached into his pocket, and he pulled out a card. It said the Carousel Club on it. And I was amazed. I didn't know who he was or what he was. My immediate impression of him was that he was a detective. He was well dressed, nattily dressed, I imagine. [A little later] he said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I am trying to get Henry Wade over to the telephone." He said, "Do you want me to get him?" ...I said, "Yes, I would like to have him over here." And he went around the desk, over to Henry Wade on the telephone...[31]

Ruby is investing more and more of himself in a role that enables him to hang around the third floor, waiting to pick up a better opportunity. It helps that he loves the role. As long as he can live within it, he can, like an actor, feel vital and alive; he can keep the dread of his real mission apart from himself.

Once he leaves police headquarters, however, he has to pass through a Walpurgisnacht. He wanders back and forth to newspaper offices and takes sandwiches to the people working at KLIF. In between, he spends an hour in a car talking to a couple, Kathy Kay, a former stripper at the Carousel, and Harry Olsen,[32] a policeman, and all three are talking in Olsen's car about how terrible it must be for Jackie Kennedy. The stripper begins to weep and the men join her with a few tears. In the moil and meld of such mutual compassion for Jackie Kennedy, all three feel respect for each other, deep respect, and each expresses it so.

After more wandering through the Dallas night, Ruby goes back to his apartment and wakes up George Senator.

Mr. Senator: Yes; it was different. It was different; the way he looked at you...

Mr. Hubert: Had you seen him in that condition before?

Mr. Senator: ...I have seen him hollering, things like I told you in the past, but this here, he had sort of a stare look in his eye...

Mr. Griffin: I didn't catch that. What kind of a look?

Mr. Senator: A stare look; I don't know...I don't know how to put it into words.

Mr. Hubert: But it was different from anything you had ever seen on Jack Ruby before?

Mr. Senator: Yes.

Mr. Hubert: And it was noticeably so?

Mr. Senator: Oh yes.[33]

Ruby then calls up his handyman, Larry Crafard, at the Carousel, wakes him up, and drives the youth and George Senator out to a billboard in Dallas that says: IMPEACH EARL WARREN. Ruby had been very upset earlier that day when he saw an ad, taken out by a man named Bernard Weissman, in the *Dallas Morning*

[25]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 377.

[26]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 378, citing affidavit of George Senator, November 24, 1963.

[27]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 378.

[28]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 379.

[29]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 379.

[30]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 379.

[31]WC Testimony, Vol. XV, p. 364.

[32]In the Warren Commission testimony, Harry Olsen's name appears incorrectly as Harry Carlson.

[33]WC Testimony, Vol. XIV, p. 221.

News alluding to Jack Kennedy as a Communist supporter. He is now convinced that the John Birch Society invented the name Weissman in order to blame the Jews.

Now he, Jack Ruby, will soon be one of the Jews being blamed for the death of Kennedy, even if he will only be blamed in the secondary sense that *they* have selected him to be the one to kill Oswald. So Jack Ruby, a Jew, will pay the second heaviest price. He is a scapegoat, just like the Jews in the Holocaust, and just like all Jews who will soon be blamed for the Weissman ad. In his distraught state, he takes photographs of the billboard —IMPEACH EARL WARREN—as if this is not only evidential material of some sort but may even prove sacramental for someone in his position. If he is acting a little loopy, well, very few hit men out on a mission are reputed to comport themselves as 100 percent sane.

It is daybreak on Saturday before he drops Larry Crafard off at the Carousel and the handyman promptly goes back to sleep on the sofa in Ruby's office. Crafard has his revenge, however, by telephoning Ruby at 8:30 in the morning. There is no food for the dogs at the Carousel, he tells his boss. Ruby flies into a rage for having had his sleep disturbed and proceeds to chew Crafard out as he never has before. Indeed, his language is so personal that Crafard packs his stuff and takes off. He is angry enough or uneasy enough to hitchhike back home to Michigan.

Somewhat later that morning, we learn from Posner,

> Ruby turned on the television and saw a memorial service broadcast from New York. "I watched Rabbi Seligman," he recalled. "He eulogized that here is a man [JFK] that fought in every battle, went to every country, and had to come back to his own country to be shot in the back. That created a tremendous emotional feeling for me, the way he said that."[34]

Ruby is trying to find impressive reasons for his intended act. He is too big a man to do such a job just because the Mob has ordered it; no, he is potentially an honorable Jewish patriot who wishes to redress a wrong in the universe. We should recognize that Ruby, now that he has been given his assignment, does not have to justify it with Mob motivations or by Mob professionalism—"I'm there to do the hit, that's it"—no, Ruby, being an amateur, would look to ennoble his task.

In any case, he seems to move without large purpose until mid-afternoon, when he goes to Dealey Plaza. As he sees the multitude of wreaths laid out for Jack Kennedy in the plaza, he weeps in his car, or so he testifies.

> *Posner*: When he left Dealey Plaza, it appears Ruby once more went to the third floor of the police headquarters, expecting an Oswald transfer that never took place. He later denied being there Saturday because, again, he probably feared it might be interpreted as evidence of premeditation. The Warren Commission said it "reached no firm conclusion as to whether or not Ruby visited the Dallas Police Department on Saturday." Yet credible eyewitness testimony shows he was there.[35]

He is still looking and he is still weeping. Ruby must have wept and/or had tears in his eyes ten to twenty times from Friday to Sunday. But, we can remind ourselves once more, he is bound to be crying for himself. His life is slipping away from him. Nevertheless, to maintain some finer sense of himself, he is also weeping for Jack, Jackie, and the children.

Soon enough, he begins to prowl again:

> *Posner*: ...Later in the afternoon [TV reporters in their van] saw him on their monitors wandering the third floor of police headquarters and approaching Wade's office, from which regular reporters were barred.[36]

Indeed, he is hyperactive:

> *Posner*: Thayer Waldo, a reporter with the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, watched Ruby giving out Carousel cards to reporters between 4:00 and 5:00 PM. He was aggressive in getting the reporters' attention, pulling the sleeves of some and slapping others on the back or arms... Ruby said..."Here's my card with both my clubs on it. Everybody around here knows me.... As soon as you get the chance, I want all of you boys to come over to my place...and have a drink on me..."[37]

Half of the time he is even behaving as he would if his life were to go on just as it used to. Talking to the reporters, he seems to have forgotten that he has closed the Carousel. He is living in two states of being. He is in his own skin and he is also playing the lead in a film full of significance and future heartbreak.

That Saturday night, with Oswald locked in his jail cell on an inaccessible floor, begins another long dark journey. Ruby has failed to produce, and it

[34]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 384.

[35]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 386.

[36]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 387.

[37]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 387.

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is a reasonable assumption that *they* will soon be letting him know about it.

Posner: By 9:30 Ruby had returned to his apartment. There, he received a call from one of his strippers, Karen Bennett Carlin, whose stage name was Little Lynn. She had driven into Dallas from Fort Worth with her husband and wondered if the Carousel was going to open over the weekend, because she needed money. "He got very angry and was very short with me," Carlin recalled. "He said, 'Don't you have any respect for the President? Don't you know the President is dead? ... I don't know when I will open. I don't know if I will ever open back up.' "[38]

How can he? If he does not kill Oswald, the Mob, after breaking his nose, his chin, and his kneecaps, will proceed to take his clubs away. Yet if he succeeds, the government will seize the Carousel. At 10:00, he telephones his sister Eva to complain about how depressed he is.

An hour goes by, and then he calls Ralph Paul. No answer.

Posner: Ruby telephoned [Paul's] restaurant again at 11:18 and discovered Paul had gone home. He then telephoned Paul three times at home, at 11:19 for three minutes, at 11:36 for two minutes, and at 11:47 for one minute. Paul said he did not feel well, and told Ruby "I was sick and I was going to bed and not to call me."[39]

That night, the Dallas jail received anonymous phone threats on Oswald's life. On later reflection, Captain Fritz thought the calls might have come from Ruby. Perhaps they did. Ruby would have been looking for excuses—I had it all set up for Sunday, but they moved Oswald on Saturday night.

Now, he calls an old friend, Lawrence Meyers, who is in Dallas for a couple of days:

Mr. Meyers: ... he was obviously very upset ... he seemed far more incoherent than I have ever listened to him. The guy sounded absolutely like he had flipped his lid, I guess...

I said, Jack, where are you... He said come have a drink with me or a cup of coffee with me ... I said, Jack, that is silly. I am undressed. I have bathed. I am in bed. I want to go to sleep but, I said, if you want a cup of coffee you come on over here and come on up to my room ... He said, no, no, he had things to do. He couldn't come over ... This went on for a little while and the last thing I said, Jack, why don't you go ahead and get a good night's sleep and forget this thing. And you call me about 6 o'clock tomorrow night ... and we will have dinner together and he said okay...

Mr. Griffin: ... the FBI has quoted you as saying that one of the things that Ruby told you in the conversation was, "I have got to do something about this." Do you remember that?

Mr. Meyers: Definitely.[40]

We can interpret that remark in two ways: I, on my own, have to do something about this; or, I have been told to do something about this.

He slept in one or another fashion that night and awoke in a terrible mood:

Mr. Senator: ... He made himself a couple of scrambled eggs and coffee for himself, and he still had this look which didn't look good ... how can I express it? The look in his eyes? ...

Mr. Hubert: The way he talked or what he said?

Mr. Senator: The way he talked. He was even mumbling, which I didn't understand. And right after breakfast he got dressed. Then after he got dressed he was pacing the floor from the living room to the bedroom, from the bedroom to the living room, and his lips were going. What he was jabbering I didn't know. But he was really pacing.[41]

Photograph © Paul DeMaria/Daily News

At lunch in Queens, September 1966: Frank Ragano is at the head of the table with, at his right, Carlos Marcello, and, next to him, Santo Trafficante

In the telephone conversation the night before, Meyers, referring to Jackie Kennedy, had said: "Life goes on. She will make a life for herself ..."[42]

It was the worst thing Meyers could have said. By now, Jack Ruby and Jackie Kennedy are one—two suffering souls who have merged. Ruby does not want to make a new life for himself—he wants his old one back.

It is so painful. Ruby cannot ask directly for sympathy, but his self-love is pouring out of him. He is bleeding for Jackie Kennedy as if she is that beautiful element in his soul that no one else knows about, and soon it will all be lost.

He is distraught in still another fashion. When he woke up on Sunday morning, he must have been living with what he had learned the night before—Oswald was scheduled to be transferred at 10:00 AM. If he wasn't at City Hall for the transfer, he might never have as good an opportunity at the County Jail.

Ruby, however, had decided not to be present. During the night, he had made up his mind. He would take whatever consequences would come from the Mob. Fuck them. He would not be their hit man.

Events, however, intervened.

Posner: At 10:19, while still lounging around the apartment in his underwear, he received a call from his dancer Karen Carlin... "I have called, Jack, to try to get some money, because the rent is due and I need some money for groceries and you told me to call." Ruby asked how much she needed, and she said $25. He offered to go downtown and send it to her by Western Union, but told her it would "take a little while to get dressed..."[43]

Then he went out. It was a little before 11:00 AM, and on his way he drove past Dealey Plaza and, according to Posner's account, began to cry once more.

Of course, if you have been debating with yourself for close to forty-eight hours whether you are or are not going to pull a trigger, and either way death or utter ruin stands before you, you might cry too at every reminder of where you are. Which is that you didn't take your last opportunity at 10:00 AM.

Oswald, however, has not yet been transferred. Captain Fritz has decided to let the press have one more look at him. A photo opportunity!

Meantime, Ruby is at the Western Union office sending $25 to his stripper. If his life is going to be smashed, he can at least do one last good deed.

Posner: ... he patiently waited in line while another customer completed her business... When he got to the counter, the cost for sending the moneygram totaled $26.87. He handed over $30 and waited for his change while the clerk finished filling out the forms... Ruby's receipt was stamped 11:17. When he left Western Union, he was less than two hundred steps from the entrance to police headquarters.[44]

Mr. Ruby: [I] walked the distance from the Western Union to the ramp. I didn't sneak in. I didn't linger in there.

I didn't crouch or hide behind anyone, unless the television camera can make it seem that way...[45]

Posner: On the third floor of the headquarters, police had informed Oswald shortly after 11:00 AM that they would immediately take him downstairs... He asked if he could change his clothes. Captain Fritz sent for some sweaters... If Oswald had not decided at the last moment to get a sweater, he would have left the jail almost five minutes earlier, while Ruby was still inside the Western Union office.[46]

Mr. Ruby: ... I did not mingle with the crowd. There was no one near me when I walked down that ramp...[47]

It is worth hearing the account of a plainclothes man named Archer, a detective on the Dallas force:

Mr. Archer: ... I could see the detectives on each side of Oswald leading him towards the ramp... I did have some bright lights shining into my eyes, and [it was hard] for me to recognize someone on the opposite side of the ramp [but] I caught a figure of a man.... I had been watching Oswald and the detectives ... and my first thought was, as I started moving—well, my first thought was that somebody jumped out of the crowd, maybe to take a sock at him. Someone got emotionally upset and jumped out to take a sock at him, [but] as I moved forward, I saw the man reach Oswald, raise up, and then the shot was fired.[48]

Mr. Ruby: ... I realize it is a terrible thing I have done, and it was a stupid thing, but I just was carried away emotionally. Do you follow that?

Chief Justice Warren: Yes; I do indeed, every word.

Mr. Ruby: I had the gun in my right hip pocket, and impulsively, if that is the correct word here, I saw him, and that is all I can say. And I didn't care what happened to me.[49]

The irony is that he was indeed impulsive. He has probably been brooding upon the act since Friday; he has had his opportunities and not taken them. Now that he has lost his opportunity, or so he sees it, he has gravitated back to the police station. It has been the center of his activities for the last two days, after all. Yet, to his surprise, here and now is Oswald! It was as if God had put the man there. God was now giving the message: Jack Ruby was supposed to do it after all. So he fulfilled his contract. Let us say that he fulfilled two contracts. He did his job for the Mob, but since he had been talking about it so much that he had come to believe it, he did it as well for Jack, Jackie, the children, and the Jewish people. He fused himself into his all but unbelievable cover story and did it for Jackie Kennedy, after all.

To the Warren Commission, he describes his feelings with considerable style. Nothing is more difficult than to

[38]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 389.

[39]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 390, citing WC Testimony, Vol. XV, pp. 672–673.

[40]WC Testimony, Vol. XVI, pp. 632–633.

[41]WC Testimony, Vol. XIV, p. 236.

[42]WC Testimony, Vol. XIV, p. 236.

[43]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 392.

[44]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 394.

[45]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 199.

[46]Posner, *Case Closed*, pp. 394–395.

[47]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 199.

[48]WC Testimony, Vol. XII, p. 399.

[49]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 199.

combine elegance with piety, but Jack has had seven months in jail to prepare this speech for Earl Warren:

> ...I wanted to show my love for our faith, being of the Jewish faith, and I never used the term and I don't want to go into that—suddenly the feeling, the emotional feeling came within me that someone owed this debt to our beloved President to save her the ordeal of coming back. I don't know why that came through my mind.[50]

He had been less sanctimonious, however, right after his gun was seized on that terminal Sunday:

> *Mr. Archer*: ...we took him on into the jail office and I assisted in keeping his left arm behind him and someone got his right. I couldn't say who it was that had his other arm. Laid him down on the floor, his head and face were away from me at that particular time. But that is when I said, "Who is he?" [He answered] "You all know me. I'm Jack Ruby." ... And he said at that particular point, "I hope I killed the son of a bitch."... I said to Ruby at that time, "Jack, I think you killed him," and he just looked at me right straight in the eye and said, "Well, I intended to shoot him three times."[51]
>
> *Posner*: When they got to the third floor, Ruby, who was excited from the shooting, talked to anybody who came by. "If I had planned this I couldn't have had my timing better," he bragged. "It was one chance in a million.... I guess I just had to show the world that a Jew has guts."...[52]

For forty and more hours before that, awake and asleep, he must have been castigating himself: You Jew, you do not have the guts to be a hit man—only Italians are that good. So he wanted to give the Mafia a real signature, his own—three shots—wanted to show the world that a Mob-style execution was not out of reach for him, a Jew.

Jack Ruby would wear brass knuckles when he got into a fight in his nightclub. He would brag to his handyman, Larry Crafard, that he had been with every girl in his club, and yet... and yet... As with Oswald, there is always more to Ruby.

> *Mrs. Carlin*: ...He was always asking the question, "Do you think I am a queer? Do you think I look like a queer? Or have you ever known a queer to look like me?" Everytime I saw him he would ask it.[53]

A man of many sides—he loved his animals:

> *Posner:* His favorite dog, Sheba, was left in the car. "People that didn't know Jack will never understand this," Bill Alexander [the Dallas assistant district attorney] told the author, "but Ruby would never have taken that dog with him and left it in the car if he knew he was going to shoot Oswald and end up in jail. He would have made sure that dog was at home with Senator and was well taken care of."[54]

Yes, Posner must be absolutely right that Ruby was not planning to kill Oswald on Sunday at 11:21 AM. But that does not take care of why Ruby—for reasons that appear considerably closer to his heart than the pain and turmoil awaiting Jacqueline Kennedy—did the deed and threw the cloak of a thousand putative conspiracies over the mystery of Lee Harvey Oswald, his life and his death. □

[50]WC Testimony, Vol. V, p. 199.

[51]WC Testimony, Vol. XII, pp. 400–401.

[52]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 398.

[53]WC Testimony, Vol. XIII, p. 215.

[54]Posner, *Case Closed*, p. 394.

Business as Usual

Murray Kempton

The evidence that Colonel Julio Roberto Alpírez supplemented his Guatemalan army salary with a decade-protracted stipend from our own Central Intelligence Agency is no longer disputed except by the apparent parties to the transaction. The case is plain enough: Alpírez was trained at Fort Benning, was graduated to the counter-insurgency employments that generated 40,000 widows and 100,000 refugees, advanced to a status qualifying him for the CIA payroll, and stayed there until 1992, when suspicions of complicity in an American citizen's murder got him downsized with $44,000 in severance.

It is always the egg on its face and never the blood on its hireling's hand that gets the CIA in trouble, which may be why the ground beneath its household occasionally trembles but unvaryingly settles solid as ever.

But the CIA must again suffer awhile with the piety whose adjective is "false" and the fraud whose modifier is "pious." All that will pass as it always has because Washington officials rarely bob up to criticize the CIA without scrupulously avoiding the real point of its sins.

What in common sense was the CIA paying Alpírez to do? He was already febrilely serving his government's will, if not the welfare of its peasant constituents. The CIA might of course pain the sensitive by arguing that Alpírez was also soldiering on in our own country's interest. To guard the national security against foreign foes is to confront a shortage of such these days and a few hundred thousand poor Indians just must make do instead.

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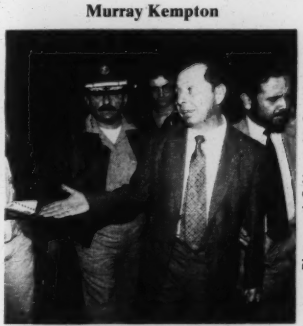

Photograph © Nancy McGirr/Black Star

Colonel Julio Roberto Alpírez, March 1995

For ten years we paid a fee to Alpírez for doing what he would have done with no less enthusiasm for free. He would likely still be uselessly reaping our sovereign fruits if he hadn't affronted our sovereignty by showing up too conspicuously among suspects in the murders of the innkeeper Michael DeVine, an American citizen, and of the guerrilla commander Efrain Velásquez Bámaca, husband of an American citizen.

Bámaca had been taken in the field, kept alive for working over for a while, and then executed. To kill a prisoner of war, even a civil war, is a violation of the Geneva Convention, although that breach is so routine in Guatemala that General Julio Balconi once explained to an Americas Watch investigator that such trespassers lost their rights when they joined the guerrillas.

It is necessary to concede that, when Bámaca went to war, he assumed heavy risks of death and harsh reprisal. Even that poor excuse does not obtain, however, either for the uninvolvedly innocent DeVine or for the three farm strikers killed and the twelve others shot by riot policemen last August.

When the steadfast pertinacity of Bámaca's wife, Jennifer Harbury, finally compelled Washington to press her complaint, Guatemala's attorney general shrewdly moved to fob off further inquiries with the claim that these two might not have been legally married and that Bámaca's ghost would be thereby debarred from even the small dignity adhering to the status of an American son-in-law.

Guatemala's rulers have lived with the parched and tiny desert of the American conscience quite long enough to recognize that all sorts of evils will be tolerated so long as they limit the victimage to their own people. In 1990 the US State Department took offense at Guatemala's violations of human rights and suspended military aid. The CIA nonetheless maintained its retainer to Colonel Alpírez, who as an officer and a violator had the best-paid reasons to appreciate the difference between what the United States says and what it does.

And so do his superiors. In 1994 the Clinton administration affirmed its confidence in a reformed Guatemala by releasing $11 million in economic aid benefits as a reward for advances toward ordered liberty marked by the gunning down of the president of its constitutional court, and the extrajudicial killings of 107 humbler citizens, none prosecuted and all officially blamed on parties unknown. The CIA shops to suit presidential taste; and it is also a presidential prerogative immediately to express shock, then promptly to forget whenever some purchased criminal has produced too public an embarrassment. □

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LETTERS

'EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM'

To the Editors:

I would agree with Tony Judt that the controversy about Hannah Arendt's Eichmann book [*NYR*, April 6] was "absurd," if the object of his judgment was merely the meeting called by *Dissent*, and in which I regret to say I took part, to debate Ms. Arendt's theses. And this before persons assembled to either execrate or adore her. I do regret my participation in that affair and broke with Irving Howe years later when he asked me to write something justifying it.

It was not proper to address complex ideas as the *Dissent* meeting tried to do. But I am not sure that Tony Judt limited his critique to that meeting alone. Could he have meant that it was "absurd" to review Ms. Arendt's book seriously? Even though it dealt with important matters, about which, as Judt himself concedes, Hannah was inadequately informed? I think quite the contrary: it would have been absurd to not challenge Ms. Arendt's "aggression"—the word comes from her friend, Karl Jaspers—against Israel and the Jews.

One thing more. I would like to know just what "life-sustaining lies" I depended on, as Tony Judt claims, in my review of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a work whose *a priori* sociology was backed by so many errors of fact per page. If Tony Judt needs some education in this regard, I suggest that he look at a definitive article on the subject, Gertrude Ezorsky's "Hannah Arendt Against the Facts," in the Fall 1963 issue of *New Politics*.

Lionel Abel

New York City

Tony Judt *replies:*

I am grateful to Lionel Abel for his letter, as it helps me understand better why he reacted as he did to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It was not a particularly difficult book, but it did require careful reading. Mr. Abel is not a careful reader. As my review made clear, what was "absurd" about the furor over Arendt's book was not the fact that it aroused so much debate and was reviewed seriously in so many places, but that commentators like Abel—both in his contribution to the infamous *Dissent* meeting and his 1963 *Partisan Review* article—could so patently misrepresent it. Moreover, Karl Jaspers did not charge Arendt with "aggression...against Israel and the Jews" but cautioned her of the price she would pay for attacking some of the "life-sustaining lies" on which so many people depend. Mr. Abel's reaction, then and now, confirms Jaspers's warning.

One of these "life-sustaining lies" is the fiction that "Israel and the Jews" form a single bloc and that to criticize any part of one is to perpetrate an unacceptable attack on both. The role of a certain narrative of the Holocaust in Israeli pedagogy and in the national foundation myth was prominent and remains so. Arendt was quite right to place it at the center of her analysis of the trial; for all her errors of fact (fewer than Mr. Abel implies), her intuition has since been taken up and debated by scholars. The history of Jewish leadership during World War Two is complex and sometimes troubling, and cannot be served up as a simple tale of criminals, heroes, and victims. Like other national stories of collaboration and resistance it is full of gray zones. Mr. Abel feels understandably discomfited to see his beliefs challenged. But to persist in describing Arendt's disquieting insights as an attack on "the Jews" shows that Mr. Abel has forgotten nothing and learned nothing in the thirty years that have elapsed since his first unfortunate foray into this arena.

MALLARME'S PROLONGATION

To the Editors:

P. N. Furbank, in his review [*NYR*, September 22, 1994] of Gordon Millan's biography of Mallarmé, charges me with foisting my own metaphysics on the poet's oeuvre. But the ideas were unequivocally his: for example, he announced (in his lectures at Oxford and Cambridge in 1894) the core structure of the future Great Work as "the symphonic equation proper to the seasons." Other than pointing out the widespread occurrence of this four-polar "equation" (at times labelled precisely as such, e.g. in the jottings called *Le Livre*), and commenting on it, all I did was dub it "tetrapolarity."

Now Michel Deguy, who is France's leading poet and the one deemed closest to Mallarmé but also, surprisingly, the President of the Collège international de philosophie, not only totally "buys" the concept, including the terminology, and declares that without it one cannot penetrate into Mallarmé's universe, but he gives a list of prominent critics who have been left behind in this respect. Guy Michaud states, in his major work on the poet, that our understanding of him has to be "entirely revised" because of the new revelations.

A simple but pregnant question: can one imagine Frenchmen of this caliber—

Félix Vallotton: Mallarmé

throw in Sartre, Blanchot, Barthes, Poulet, Foucault, Kristeva, Richard, who offer overwhelming testimony of the groundbreaking nature of Mallarméan epistemology, as against the incredible pitch Furbank makes for a purely non-ideational reading of him—can one *imagine*, I repeat (still stunned at the enormity of the proposition) those elite French minds "buying" the theses of an obscure *American*, if they were as empty, arbitrary, even wacky, as Mr. Furbank indisputably and recklessly declares? Why did the whole Tel Quel group go for them or even, as has been authoritatively suggested, the entire French avant-garde? Plus Guy Rosolato, Jean Cassou, Ungaretti, Hermann Broch...Mondor himself wrote that these ideas were "essential." Georges Poulet remarked that they explained *Igitur*.

But if the reader takes the word of someone who has done no more than read Mallarmé over that of a person who has spent sixty years on him (nine books in print) and been called more than once Mallarmé's prolongation ("Mallarmé posthume," Deguy), well it just offers more evidence of why smart young people are apt to go into science.

Robert Greer Cohn

Professor Emeritus of French
Stanford University
Stanford, California

To the Editors:

Just a footnote to P. N. Furbank's review of Gordan Millan's *A Throw of the Dice: The Life of Stéphane Mallarmé*: I do not believe it is correct that Mallarmé's Hérodiade as a name for Salome is his invention. He has it from Heinrich Heine's mock-epic, *Atta Troll: A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1846), where the Jewish *femme fatale* Herodias appears in a dream, along with the Romantic fairy Abunde and the Classical huntress Diana, as one of the muses of Heine's poetic imagination. Mallarmé was well acquainted with Heine's work, which was a source of the Salome/Herodias motif in French literature throughout the nineteenth century.

Jeffrey L. Sammons

Professor of German
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

PRAISING YEATS

To the Editors:

I have just seen, belatedly, Denis Donoghue's review [*NYR*, April 21, 1994] of my book *Running to Paradise: Yeats's Poetic Art*. Professor Donoghue and I are colleagues of long acquaintance. I don't doubt his good will and won't labor the general differences we may have about poetry. But there are three points concerning the review I can't well let pass. I'll note them as briefly as possible.

The most basic point is that Mr. Donoghue overlooks the substance of the book. He doesn't get around to noting that it has to do, in attentive detail, with the whole range of Yeats's lyric poetry and poetic drama: their preoccupations, their unfolding and interactive qualities of form (especially the emotional dynamics involved), and the psychological pressures at work in them.

The second point has to do with the suggestion that I "dismiss" Yeats's poem "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation" because of its undemocratic stance. Well, I do mention that stance (about which Mr. Donoghue agrees with me), and I do suggest that the poem's anti-egalitarian passion is less moving than the hard-wrung triumph over self-pity in the equally undemocratic "No Second Troy." But my discussion is anything but dismissive of the poem's artistry. Anyone who reads it, as well as the other comments in *Running to Paradise* on politically resonant poems and plays, should see how unwarranted is the inference of such bias.

The third point is Mr. Donoghue's trouble over my declared interest in the quality of Yeats's art. "Quality," he quirkily declares, is best "not defined or even talked about: let it emerge when the critic is thinking of something else, as in Rosenthal's book when he's reading 'Demon and Beast' and 'The Tower' and letting the pleasure of the reading animate his sentences."

I'm grateful for this praise! My old friend seems to be casting a favorable vote after all, despite earlier dismissive—to borrow his term—comments. Nevertheless, I do wish he had let your readers know what *Running to Paradise* actually has to say about the body of Yeats's writings over more than a half-century.

M. L. Rosenthal

Suffern, New York

Denis Donoghue *replies:*

I am grateful to M. L. Rosenthal for the cordial tone of his letter. We are old friends, and it shows.

On this occasion we agree-and-disagree. We agree on the distinctive scale and power of Yeats's work. But *Running to Paradise* doesn't deal, "in attentive detail, with the whole range of Yeats's lyric poetry and poetic drama." If it did, it would be an extraordinary achievement for a single book of criticism. Professor Rosenthal's book is rich in "attentive detail," but the claim to comprehensiveness is excessive.

We disagree, too, on the theory and practice of criticism. If he wishes to show that "No Second Troy" is a better poem than "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation," I am not persuaded by his telling me that the latter poem is "an incantation against elementary democratic reforms" and that the former poem enacts

Yeats's "hard-wrung triumph over self-pity." These are disparate considerations: the first is ideological, the second psychological or moral. I can't agree that they come together in an analysis of Yeats's language or that they work toward a critical discrimination of the poems.

Professor Rosenthal's third point of disagreement turns upon the issue of poetic quality. He maintains that critics of Yeats have neglected this consideration. I don't think they have. I could name many critics, starting with T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and Cleanth Brooks, who have taken up the question of quality in relation to Yeats's poems. Much as I warm to the verve of Professor Rosenthal's commentary on many poems, I don't see that he has greatly clarified the question of quality or provided a vocabulary in which the question might, with a particular poem in view, be discussed. That was the point of my saying, in the review, that if Professor Rosenthal disagrees with another critic of Yeats—Leavis, for instance—on a question of critical evaluation or discrimination, his book "doesn't indicate how the issue between them might even be joined." Adjectives of praise or blame, even in the profusion of *Running to Paradise*, don't add up to a poetics that might usefully be examined in its bearing upon the question of quality.

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THOUGHTFUL, LIVELY, PRINCIPLED, ATTRACTIVE J.D./M.S.W., 41, mother of 3 year-old, living in Cambridge, MA, seeks wise, engaged, communicative man, 35–50s, for lasting relationship. *NYR Box 1010.*

SF BAY AREA, SWF, 47, pretty, professional, spiritual, straightforward, marriage-minded, amateur musician with class, depth, and teenage daughter seeks solvent, emotionally mature SM with spacious heart and mind for lifelong pleasures. *NYR Box 1015.*

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Artistic, attractive, svelte, intuitive DWF, NYC, 41, 5'3" creative MD with progressive outlook. European background, multilingual, much travelled, much read, much seen in the arts, the theatre, the cinema. Metamorphoses to the sound of classical music and ocean surf. Especially sensitive and responsive to aesthetic values, analytic thought, passionate pursuits. Would welcome man 40-55 academic/artist/professional, Jewish or non, nonsmoker, nonobese. *NYR Box 1147.*

UNOSTENTATIOUS, CLASSY, SINEWY, HANDSOME, European, laden with intellective prowess and distinction, lived on three continents, wishes to show you Europe as you never knew. You are my match, perhaps Japanese. *NYR Box 1100.*

PRAGMATICALLY AMORAL EAST COAST DESIGNER/ARTIST in flux. GWM, 40, with ornamented small frame, drawn to the edge of both the physical and reason, seeks correspondence with more-grounded Bay Area complement in anticipation of relocation to SF. *NYR Box 1101.*

LAWYER (SUCCESSFUL)/ WRITER (MARGINAL)/ HORSE- PLAYER (RECOVERING): NYC DWM, 52, presentable, post-adolescent, tastes high brow/(mostly) low: seeks attractive companion. Would "meet cute" if could, but since never has, runs this ad. *NYR Box 1102.*

IT'S NOT EASY FINDING THE RIGHT WOMAN. But I'm a young 57 DWM writer/editor in New Haven who keeps looking. Intellectual, introspective, romantic, good looking, slim, healthy vegetarian six-footer, I thrive on books, films, chamber music, art, photography, laughter at the absurd, hugs and kisses, long walks, long talks, and seasides. I crave bright, good-looking, affectionate, articulate, honest woman, 45 to 60, who's not just dabbling in men or with life.

NYR Box 1026.

SJF STRIKING, INTELLIGENT, ARTISTIC, early forties, relocating N.Y./Mass. seeks SM. *Box 620746, Newton, Mass 02162.*

WARM-HEARTED, ATTRACTIVE, FIT, LITERATE MANHATTANITE, DWF, 49, seeks vital, caring man for engrossing conversations, laughter, and long walks in new places. *NYR Box 1104.*

SEEKING LONG-TERM ADVENTURES WITH COUNTERPART and best friend. Sophisticated, romantic JFNS wishes to share her passion for art and pleasures of NYC with upbeat professional man, 55–65. *NYR Box 1109.*

CLASSY VERY ATTRACTIVE. Slim, Manhattan female, 50s, seeks cultured, athletic male 60+. Photo. *NYR Box 1105.*

NYC AREA SWM HISTORIAN-LINGUIST-THEOLOGIAN, intellectual, funloving, kind, romantic, liberal ecumenical Christian, seeks gentle, attractive, cultured SWF, 30–48, for fun, affection, sharing interests. *NYR Box 1106.*

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lives in Manhattan/East Hampton. Self-employed advertising artist, financially secure. Shy, great listener, sense of humor and varied interests. Wishes to meet a woman who is sensitive and independent to help me come out of my shell. *NYR Box 1025.*

GWM, HEALTHY WASP, 37, smart with heart seeks sweetheart. *Box 8358, New York, NY 10150.*

EXECUTIVE, 62, GOOD-LOOKING, MARRIED, seeks similar lady for extremely discreet, pleasant relationship. *NYR Box 1108.*

BEARDED, BEARISH ARCHITECT/FILMMAKER, 68, 5'11", nonsmoker. Loves good music, movies, cats and puns. Looking for Manhattan woman, 50s, share museums, concerts, etc.... *NYR Box 1110.*

JDF—NYC AND NORTHERN SUBURBS. Attractive, slim, 5'5", intelligent woman seeking gentle man 59+ for mutually satisfying relationship. A sense of the ridiculous is a must! *NYR Box 1111.*

I'M A MARRIED MAN, LATE FIFTIES, HEALTHY, fit & so on, who's looking for a doubtless rare kind of woman—herself also married, centered, but who feels something missing. I'm not talking here of domesticity, long walks, concerts, touring Tuscany together. Let's call what I have in mind the possibility of sexual friendship. Something private, pleasurable, deliberately compartmentalized. The woman I'm looking for is bound to be shy about an ad like this but conquer your shyness enough to write me and then we'll see what we want to happen next. *NYR Box 1027*

WARM, WITTY, WHITE WIDOW. Dark-haired: almost. Intelligent: somewhat. NYC or north suburbs. 5'6", slim, late 50s, striking. N/S Jewish. Enjoy: pasta, pizza, Bx Zoo, Tanglewood. Seeks: just a nice friend. *NYR Box 1112.*

ATTRACTIVE AND AFFECTIONATE EUROPEAN WOMAN, MID 30s, professional, PhD, seeks a gentleman of similar qualities, 30–45, who is sophisticated and worldly. *NYR Box 1113.*

PRETTY, VIVACIOUS, BRUNETTE, European academic with charming laugh, beautiful eyes, interested in the arts, literature, theater, and international affairs, seeks warm, accomplished, professionally secure, cultured man, 45–60, for caring relationship. *NYR Box 1114.*

COUPLES NEED TO MEET COUPLES, TOO. It's not just a singles world out there. Only about one per cent of married couples extend themselves to other couples. What a waste! If you've often dreamed of just the right, compatible, couple tell us about yourselves. *NYR Box 1149.*

SAN FRANCISCO, PROFESSIONAL WOMAN WRITER looking for fun and excitement by sharing good times and feelings. I love to travel, laugh and talk. I have no dependents and am free to travel with the right man. *NYR Box 1115.*

GROWN-UP WOMAN SEEKS GROWN-UP MAN. Pretty, fit, 47 year old divorced Ph.D. professional, with cultural/athletic interests, loving friends, and social conscience, having traveled broadly and lived deeply, is now eager to trade perfect fantasy for imperfect reality. *NYR Box 1116.*

ATTRACTIVE, FIT, WISE AND WITTY, SPIRITED PROFESSIONAL WOMAN, 50s. Loves nature, chamber music, opera, Yoga, community building. Wishes to enjoy companionship, affection, travel, and the arts with fit, joyful, youthful, financially intact man 40-65 years. Send descriptive letter. *NYR Box 1117.*

HIKING PARTNER: Outdoorsy, slim, pretty BU professor, 49 y.o. seeks fun-loving, fit, single man to share summer's adventures. Also concerts, dinners, intelligent conversations. Love of wine and music helpful. *NYR Box 1118.*

WARM-HEARTED, CREATIVE BOSTON WOMAN seeks committed relationship with kind, intelligent man who enjoys arts, people, humor, travel. Please, no form letters. *NYR Box 1120.*

AFFECTIONATE HISTORIAN seeks slim, attractive, bright woman. DWM, handsome, progressive, 40s, 5'6", enjoys time together, arts, city, outdoors, swimming. *POB 405, NYC 10024.*

BOSTON AREA, SWM, PHYSICIAN, (Internal Med, Critical Care), 48, 5'11"—Interests include medical education, medicolegal issues, stock-market speculation, thoroughbred racing, surf-casting; Politically lib. Republican; seeks SF with complementary interests. Photo apprec. *NYR Box 1119.*

SINGLE NYC JEWISH WOMAN WRITER: Intellectual, attractive, compassionate. Seeks same in Jewish man. I'm 39 and 5'9"; you're 35–50. *NYR Box 1122.*

LANGUISHING IN LALALAND: Lively, literate, good-looking lady, 45, longs to locate learned, lighthearted "lothario," 40–55, for lifetime luminous liaison. Photo please. *NYR Box 1123.*

BALTIMORE—DC AREA. Mature, active professional, male, financially secure, divorced. Children grown and independent. Seeks vital, attractive female to age 45 to share varied athletic and cultural interests. Photo and brief letter please. Shall reciprocate in kind. *NYR Box 1124.*

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EX PROF., NOW PETIT-BOURG. 58, tall, reasonably fit, secure, funny. Has usual NYR-reader interests: nature, books, left politics, blasphemy, transmission repair. Seeks slender, warm SF with sensayuma. Photo appreciated. *NYR Box 1127.*

CAMBRIDGE/BOSTON. Tall, dark, handsome, SWM, youthful 41, Ph.D., very successful, humorous, seeks SF 27–33 residing in area code 617 to explore cultural diversions on both sides of the Charles River. Letter, photo, please. *NYR Box 1128.*

Great looking, smart, amusing blond—*gentle, cultured, aesthetic, psychologically, spiritually and physically fit writer/chef—summer, hiker, explorer, art and movie lover, avid reader and traveler seeks happy, funny, honest, intelligent, liberal, healthy n.s. man who appreciates great legs—can be bald—43-58.*

NYR Box 1148

DJM61, GENTLE, ENTHUSIASTIC, artist, gthumb, scientist, canoe camper, naturalist, shul, dancer, spirit/pers/growth iso fit, n/s sensuous, caring, financially independent DWWJF47–64 unafraid to stay on her path & with heart opening. Kids gone. *PO Box 32, Simpsonville, MD 21150.*

INTENSE, ATTRACTIVE SWF, 28, SEEKS LIKE SM. You're grumpy yet charming, seriously funny, and wild for good conversation. Hoboken/NYC. *NYR Box 1130.*

RADIANT, GOOD-NATURED, ARTICULATE, PRETTY, BLUE-EYED REDHEAD. Slender, leggy, 5'8" Manhattan woman with successful creative career, ready laugh, classically avant-garde style. Considered joyful, forthright, interesting and interested. Loves learning, lives rich-textured life. Speaks French, Italian. Likes exploring exotic destinations; returning to old favorites: Paris, Positano. Enjoys foreign films, Puccini, Bach, off-B'way, cats, dogs. Studies ballet. Values courageousness. Seeks accomplished, physically fit, open-minded, attractive, worldly man (45-59) with sense of his own values and positive attitude. *NYR Box 1146.*

ATTRACTIVE MANHATTAN ATTORNEY, with sincerity, warmth, & wit, seeks kind, professionally accomplished man in his 40s or 50s, with sense of humor. *NYR Box 1131.*

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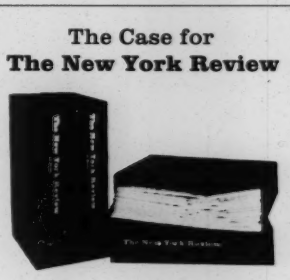

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Caring Counselor/Academic SWF Seeks Soul-Mate: Pretty Woman, warm, empathic, of sparkling mind and intuition, slim, enjoys theater, dance, children, animals, cuddling, seeks caring, communicative, active man about 50-55. (I'm slightly younger), above my 5'6", ready for a nurturing, lasting relationship.

NYR Box 1145

PETITE, ATTRACTIVE PROFESSIONAL 56, educated, unpretentious, seeks male friend L.I., N.Y.C. *NYR Box 1136.*

SUCCESSFUL, BUSINESS WOMAN, PRETTY, SEXY, SPIRITED AND SPIRITUAL (40ish swf artist) seeking physically fit, philosophically inclined, awake, male co-conspirator for friendship—hopefully more. Religion, age, profession no matter, but no bogus. 212 area. Photo, note, please. *NYR Box 1137.*

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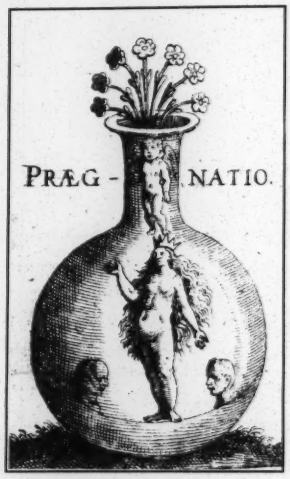

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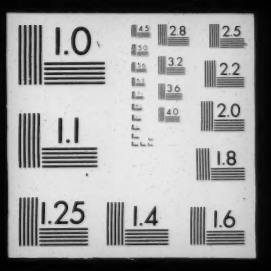
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